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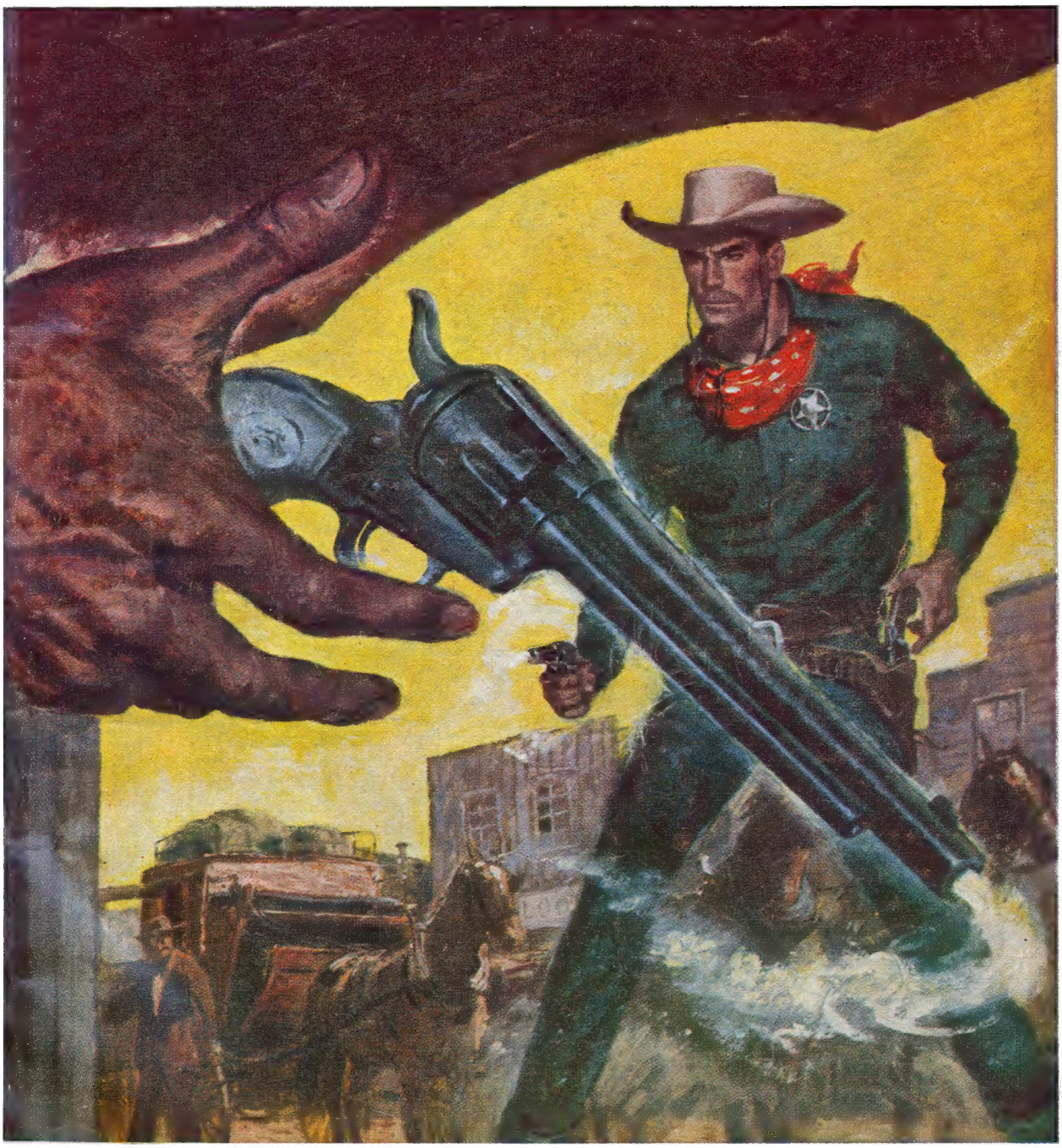

FEATURING: **LIFELINE OF TEXAS**

A JIM HATFIELD ACTION NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 53, No. 1 DECEMBER, 1953

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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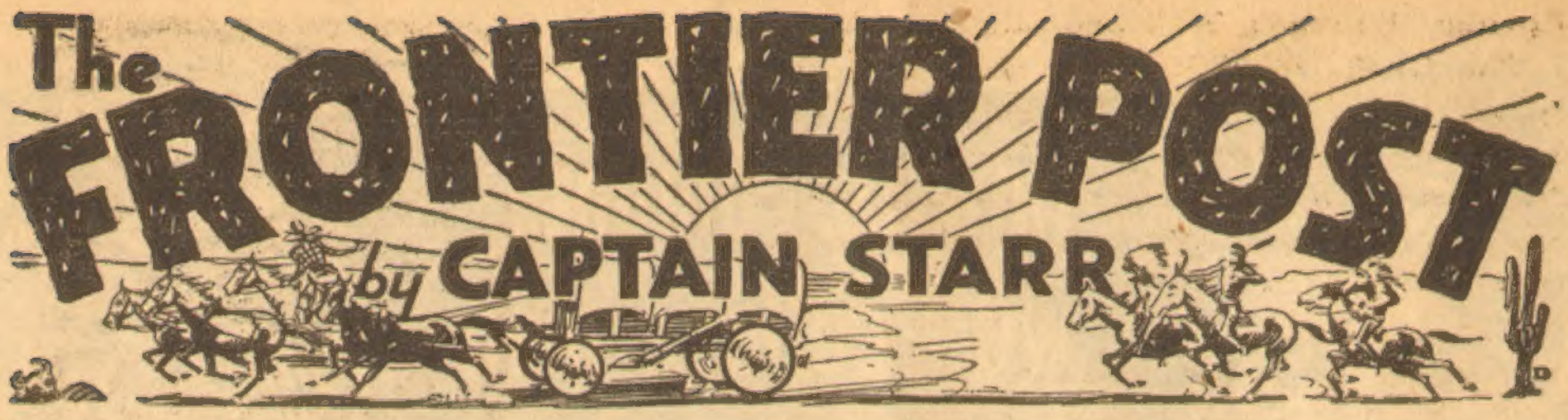

The Indian Who Outran Horses

WILLIE BOY was a bad Indian. But he was a marvelous athlete. His superhuman feats of strength, speed, endurance and boldness have made desert legend. Afoot, he outran and outfoxed a mounted posse. Single-handed, he outfought 27 manhunters in a showdown battle. With one remarkable shot from a .30-30 he dropped a horse dead and wounded the rider.

In one terrific day Willie Boy led his pursuers over 40 miles of hot, rugged desert, until they quit, their horses exhausted. At another time, during the 11-day chase, Willie Boy ran 10 miles without stopping.

Willie Turns Killer

Until that all happened, in September 1909, Willie Boy had kept out of trouble. He was an undersized, 28-year-old Piute cowboy. His troubles started when he got overfond of a 15-year-old Indian girl, Isoleta, at a ranch on the outskirts of Banning, California.

The girl's father, Old Mike, objected to Willie Boy as a suitor and threatened to kill him. But Willie Boy beat him to it. He stole a Winchester, killed Old Mike at Gilman's Ranch and abducted Isoleta.

Constable Ben de Crevecoeur and Deputy Joe Toutain organized a posse and the long, incredible chase began, joined later by large

posses from San Bernardino and Daggett, about 100 men in all.

The posse led by de Crevecoeur and Toutain pressed the fugitive so close that they heard the girl scream. The creosote bush and undergrowth was sparse and the washes shallow that first day. It seemed impossible that a man could hide from experienced trackers. Later they learned that Willie Boy managed it by trailing the posse!

Next day the chase led up out of San Gorgonio Pass into Whitewater Canyon and across into a barren region called Devil's Garden. There in the mud of a creekbed, fingered in Piute sign language, Isoleta left a sad farewell message, saying she soon would be dead.

On the third day they came onto her body. When the girl, packed with plunder Willie Boy had taken from a miner's cabin, played out and could go no further he shot her.

This was in a hellish region known as The Pipes. On Willie Boy's fresh tracks the posse found the head of a jackrabbit. Willie Boy had shot it neatly through the eye and left it as a grim and wordless warning.

It was soon after that he fired on Deputy Sheriff Charley Reche with freak and tragic results. The bullet hit the handcuffs in Reche's hip pocket, half entered his spine, crippling him for life. The other half slanted downward, instantly killing Reche's horse in its tracks.

Top-Hand Trickery

Zig-zagging across Morongo Valley, north through the Bullion Mountains and south to 29 Palms, Willie Boy dodged and tricked his pursuers.

One night he slept within 50 yards of a posse's campfire, heard them planning their course of action.

More than once after that, they found the super-renegade's tracks on top of their own at waterholes. Once, in a tight fix, he made his getaway by shooting the posse's horses from under them.

The dead girl and the badly wounded Deputy Sheriff were sent back to Banning.

Supplies were brought back to Dead Woman Springs, Warren's Well and other points.

The tracks of Willie Boy were lost, then found again. He had headed north once more out of 29 Palms, past Mesquite Spring, Surprise Spring, Rock Corral and then angled southward, into the region of The Pipes again, where he had murdered Isoleta.

Last Bullet

It was there he shot it out with a posse, compelling it to retire, defeated. It wasn't until days later, in returning to the scene, that Ben de Crevecoeur found the body of Willie Boy. He had not been killed by man-hunters. He had fired his last bullet into his own heart.

Why, after peaceable living, did Willie Boy go berserk? He was a capable and dependable puncher, according to ranchers he had worked for. He was quiet and well-behaved at all times—unless he had liquor under his belt. He was a mean one, then.

That was the answer to Willie Boy's outbreak. Firewater. He had been on a big drunk before his outbreak, it was found out later.

The extraordinary chase was not prolonged by blunders. It wasn't a pack of tenderfoots who went after Willie Boy. The lawmen were tough and experienced. Their possemen were seasoned desert rats. Some had been born and raised in the locality, such as Toutain, who still lives in Banning. They were aided by crafty, trailwise Indians such as Segundo Chino.

The Fiery Finish

But Willie Boy was out in front and doing all right until he ran out of ammunition. He came mighty close to making a clean getaway, up into the Piute country of Nevada, never to pay the penalty for his double crime.

Willie Boy's body wasn't in very good condition when they found it and nobody was happy about the prospect of packing it all the way back to Banning. It came as a piece of good news when Segundo Chino told the white possemen that cremation was a tribal custom.

So they heaped up a lot of dry brush, laid what was left of Willie Boy on top of it, touched a match to it and took off for town while the fire was still burning.

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range

News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

Nevada State Museum officials have long been pondering the classification of a 66-year-old bottle of beer contributed by a Reno woman. Mrs. R. H. Cowles said her husband took the beer with him on a fishing trip on July 5, 1887, brought it back untouched and intended taking it with him on another trip but never did. We suggest calling it The One That Got Way Away.

And speaking of things ancient, fossil oysters over 30 inches in diameter have been found along the lower Rio Grande valley. This sounds like an item that should have gone in our Tall Tale department, except that the most fantastic things we hear about Texas usually turn out to be the truth—or an interesting variation thereof.

Frank Miller of Livermore, Colorado, can shoot down aerial targets with a shotgun from his left shoulder while standing on a horse and keeping a large lariat loop twirling. We're not just sure of what this proves, except that Frank ought to make a pretty good posse.

Oklahoma and New Mexico recently granted women the right to serve on juries. Egad, Edwardo, there goes our last frontier!

A Utah sheep herder explained why he had bought such a staggering amount of nose drops. A ewe ordinarily will refuse to nurse lambs not her own. He puts the drops into the noses of ewes so they would accept and "mother" orphan lambs. One drop, he said, makes one small lamb seem much like another as far as the ewe's nose is concerned. Ewe see?

A fisherman near Galveston, Texas, plans to keep his mouth shut while fishing hereafter. Awhile back, while he was emptying his net, a small fish leaped into his mouth, got stuck in his throat, and he had to have it removed by an operation. No need to emphasize the fact that this fellow was a Texan.

Kids are braver than bears, and as proof of this startling statement we offer the story told by Rocky Mountain National Park officials about an inquisitive bear who snatched a discarded doll out of a park garbage can. When the bear squeezed the doll with its paw, it cried "Mama!" The bear dropped the doll, backed away, then broke into a run and vanished.

A spot near Rugby, North Dakota, is the geographic center of the continent. What are you Texans going to do about that?

Lifeline of TEXAS

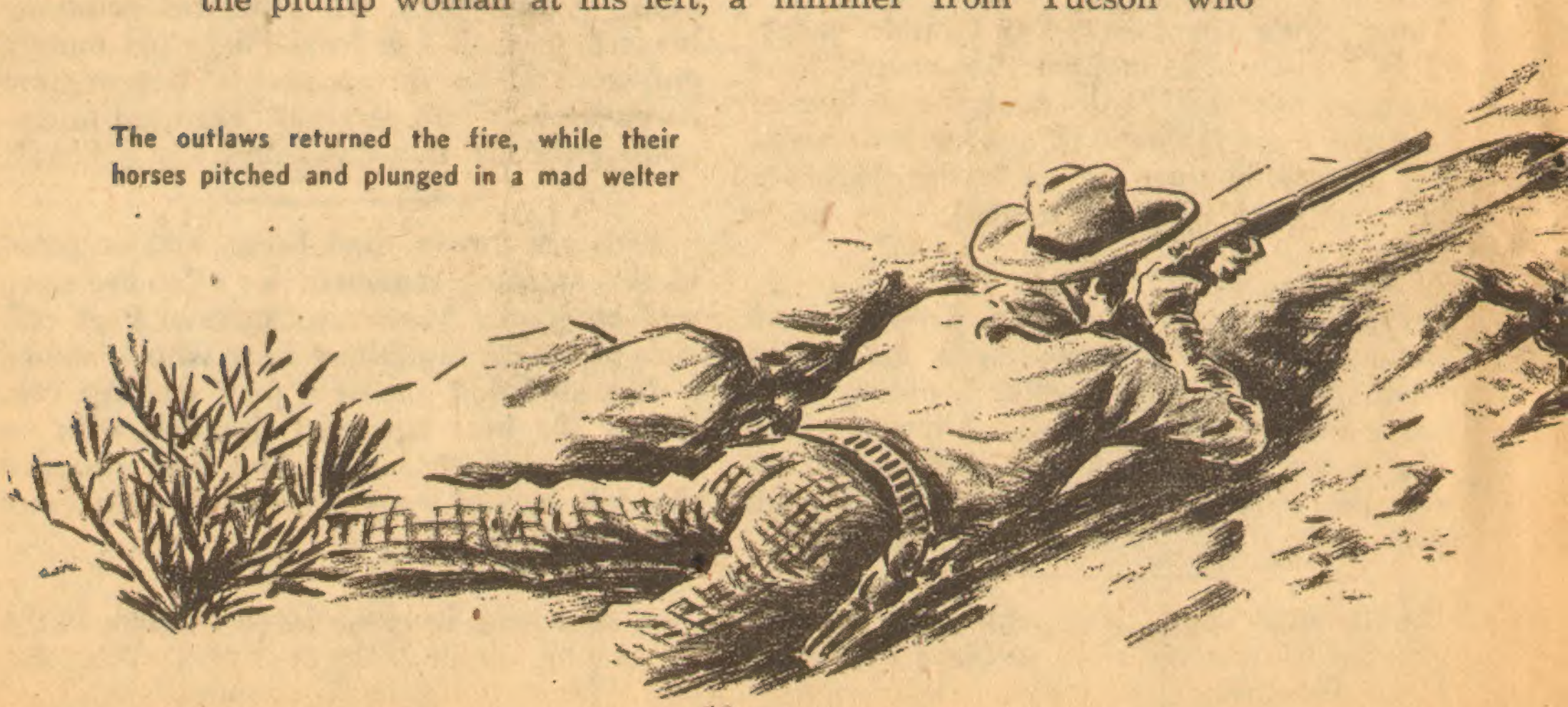
A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Westbound Stage

THE stagecoach smashed over the rough half-graded road on its northwesterly course, with gravel spattering under the floor and the six passengers battered into a state of semi-stupor. Afternoon heat bore down upon them, and alkali dust bit into their eyes and throats. It was wearing, even to a relaxed and patient man like Ranger Jim Hatfield, in the right corner of the rear seat.

"Do you think this stage will be held up, mister?" inquired the plump woman at his left, a milliner from Tucson who



The outlaws returned the fire, while their horses pitched and plunged in a mad welter

The Lone Wolf knew this case of the missing stage coaches was big. No one could have guessed just how big or how very deadly

somehow managed to remain cheerful in spite of discomfort.

"I don't know, ma'am," Hatfield said. "But I wouldn't worry about it."

"Heavens, I'm not worried." She laughed. "Anything that broke the monotony would be welcome. Almost anything, that is."

A man who earlier had given his name as George Dunlap spoke from the left side of the back seat. "We won't be harmed, madam, if the stage is held up. Outlaws don't molest passengers." He was a solid, self-important man in well-tailored clothes, who for some unrevealed reason had displayed an irrational dislike for Jim Hatfield.

A girl who sat in the center of the front seat, facing them, laughed shrilly and said:

"What's the fun of being held up, if they don't molest you a little?"

She was young, painted, and of obvious profession, but until now she had affected a bored and haughty attitude that was almost laughable. The salesman at her side tilted his derby, smoothed the lapels of his checked suit, and glanced at her with new interest. The gnarled leathery horse trader at her other shoulder scowled and chewed harder on his tobacco.

A strange group, Hatfield thought, but it was the antagonistic Dunlap who held his interest. It was plain that the man with the florid, fleshy features considered himself eminently superior to most of the human race whom apparently he held in low esteem, and for some reason regarded Hatfield as the lowest of the lot.

It seemed to Hatfield that he had been riding stage-coaches forever, and he thought longingly of the sorrel he had left at Elkhorn Station. This was a torturous way to travel, for a man who had grown up on horseback, yet he realized the vital importance of this Butterfield Stage Line. Running between San Antonio and San Diego, California, it was the only public means of communication and transportation between Texas and the Coast.

JOHN BUTTERFIELD, owner of the famed stage line, was a great man, a genius in the field of transportation, and the country was deeply indebted to him and his far-flung organization. But now someone who apparently was of a different mind was striking consistent and crippling blows against the Butterfield Line, particularly in the stretch between Elkhorn and El Paso. Which was why Jim Hatfield was riding the cushions instead of a saddle. He *did* expect this coach to be raided, because it was carrying the payroll of the copper smelting company in El Paso.

Yes, he thought musingly, this line warranted full protection, for in its way the Concord coach was as essential as the Colt gun in settling and building the West. A vehicle like this, built in faraway New Hampshire, was the only public conveyance spanning this broad wilderness of the Southwest.

The milliner must have been having thoughts along the same lines as his own, for she asked suddenly, "You acquainted with Asa Stoneham?"

Jim Hatfield nodded, smiling as she brought to mind the divisional superintendent of the Butterfield Line. "A fine man, ma'am."

"He is that," she declared warmly. "As good as he is handsome, too, the Squire. I knew him when he was Butterfield's top trouble-shooter, in the early days of this road. A tough gunfighter, then, although you wouldn't think it to see him now. They do say, though, that he's as good a super as he was a fighter."

"I believe he is," Hatfield agreed.

He was recalling the tall, regal, benevolent Stoneham, a distinguished figure with his gray hair, black mustache, and noble profile. And he was also remembering how Asa Stoneham's austere dignity was mellowed by a warm smile and gentle voice.

George Dunlap snorted, "He won't be super much longer, if he doesn't put an end to these robberies on his division."

That was probably true, too, Hatfield knew. The last time he had seen Stone-

ham, the man had been worn, bewildered and harrowed by the sudden succession of losses between El Paso and Elkhorn Station. Almost invariably the coaches attacked had been carrying pay-rolls and ore shipments, but the extraordinary thing, the startling mystery was—what had happened to the stages themselves? Driven away by the bandits in every holdup, they had completely disappeared.

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

It was as if the bandits were planning on setting up a stage line of their own, perhaps across the Border in Mexico, and were collecting rolling stock in preparation.

And so far the law had been unable to trace a single vehicle! They vanished as if by magic, with all sign wiped out.

With the bandits knowing just which stages to strike, and when, it looked as if they must have inside information. But Stoneham stoutly denied any such possibility.

"I know this road from end to end, and everyone working on it, down to the newest stableboy, Hatfield!" he had insisted stubbornly and sincerely to the inquiring Ranger. "Every man, woman, and child on the pay-roll takes personal pride in keeping the stages rolling on schedule. When we lose a driver or a guard, like we have been doing lately, I feel as if I'd lost a brother or a son. So do the others. I know them all so well! I can't see any employee of this company selling us out."

Stoneham was highly regarded, and always had been, in a business he knew from one end to the other. He could still climb onto the box and handle a six-horse hitch like a master, or take a sawed-off Greener and ride shotgun guard. Only a year ago, riding below as a passenger, he had almost single-handedly broken up an attempted holdup, shooting down two outlaws and routing the rest. And he had become an excellent executive, in the bargain.

But he was wrong on one score. Of that Jim Hatfield was sure. There *had* to be traitors in the ranks, and evidently they were on the section between Elkhorn and El Paso del Norte.

CAPTAIN BILL MacDOWELL, in Austin, had said before sending his top Ranger out on the scout, "Give Goldy a rest and ride the stages for awhile, Jim. Sooner or later they'll hit a coach you're on, and you'll have a real lead to follow. Let the other boys work the outside, while you're traveling on the inside."

He had been speaking of the three other Rangers he had also assigned to this job, all three of them long-time comrades of the Lone Wolf—as Cap'n Bill himself had dubbed Hatfield long ago. One of them, Milt Travers, was a battle-hardened veteran in spite of his youth and his blond good looks; another, Red Bouchard, who once had been a hermit in the Indian Nations before becoming a Ranger, was distinguished by possessing the reddest hair and whiskers and bluest eyes in all of Texas; and the third, Fox Edley, reformed owlhoot, gunman, gambler, and bronc peeler, was a man to ride the river with

—wire-thin and tough, keen as a steel blade.

All markedly different, but all Rangers in the highest tradition.

Hatfield had had a hunch for some time now that this stage he was riding was going to be held up before it reached El Paso, and something further made him suspect that this man who called himself George Dunlap might be involved with the bandits. Nothing but a hunch, yet sometimes a man had to play them, when he couldn't draw any better cards to fill his hand. So although he looked to be entirely relaxed and disinterested, he was keenly alert as the coach bounced on.

There was a supper stop at Pueblo Springs, the last before the overnight stop at Elkhorn Station. It was a relief to climb out of that crate and stretch limbs and body in Pueblo, and Hatfield had a drink with the driver, Pat Shannon, and the gun guard, Dutch Metz, before going to the table with them. Pork and beans again, with cornbread that wasn't bad, but coffee that was of acid strength.

"Expecting any trouble on this run, boys?" Hatfield inquired as they ate, removed from the passengers.

"West of Elkhorn we got to expect anything these days," Shannon said gloomily. "We ain't been hit yet, but we probably will be."

"They've killed quite a few of our boys," muttered Metz, glumly.

"They don't kill 'em unless they try to fight," Shannon said. "If you're smart, Dutch, you'll throw down that Greener when they tell you to."

"We can't afford to lose no more stages, Pat," protested Metz.

"Us getting blowed off the box ain't going to save any coaches," Pat Shannon declared. "I'll fight anybody I got a chance with, but I ain't going to buck ten or twenty tequila-drunk Mex gunnies from across the Rio. I ain't worth nothing to Butterfield dead, and neither are you, Dutchman."

"All right, Irish," Metz said good-naturedly. "We'll cross that river when we come to it."

They lit after-supper cigars and drifted outside, the coach men wandering off to the barn while Hatfield loitered under a pepper tree. Lamps and torches made ragged yellow and reddish splashes in the darkness of the street. George Dunlap strutted pompously into the saloon next door to the stage depot. On the porch behind the Ranger, a flat palm made smacking contact with a flabby cheek, and he turned in time to see the little salesman recoil from the swinging hand of the painted girl.

She came striding on to Hatfield, her mask of hauteur and boredom gone, her eyes and lips frankly interested and inviting as she stared boldly up at him.

"I'm sick of that damn stage and pudgy, pawing little drummers, and the stink of horses," she complained. "Why don't we stop off here, big boy? It could be worth your while."

"Sorry, ma'am," drawled Hatfield. "But I've got to go on to Elkhorn."

"Maybe it's that woman who owns the station there, huh?" she said slyly. "That Celinda Moore."

"No, not any woman, I reckon."

"Maybe you don't like women, mister?" She was sneering now.

"They're all right," Hatfield conceded. "In their place and time."

"Go to hell, you hulking galoot!" the girl spat at him, wheeled and swaggered insolently back past the salesman, swaying her hips. "Come around when you grow up, little man," she told him, and went back inside the station barroom.

WANTING another drink before starting out again, Hatfield decided it would be just as well to try the other nearby saloon. When he entered, the bar was pretty well lined, and Hatfield's six-four height attracted some attention as it usually did. Blue smoke wreaths curled around the hanging oil lamps, and the click of pool balls and slap of cards came from an adjacent room.

Dunlap, at the bar, ignored the Ranger, and appeared to be nodding at his own reflection in the backbar mirror. It was

such an exaggerated nodding, however, that Hatfield sensed danger the instant he caught a furtive flicker of motion in the dim, dirty mirror.

Whirling smoothly from the bar, he saw a slim, dark Mexican coming at him, lamplight glimmering on the blade of the knife he held low. There was no time to draw or dodge. Insides contracting, Hatfield crouched and reached for the up-flashing knife-hand. With a perfection of timing and precision, he caught that sinewy wrist in a crushing grasp, and twisted with bone-grinding violence.

The blade dropped point first and stood quivering in the planks of the floor. The Mexican screamed and slumped to his knees in the sawdust, right hand dangling from a broken wrist. Striding in, Hatfield struck at that twisted dark face, smashing the Mex backward and stretching him senseless under a table.

From the corner of his eye, Hatfield was certain he glimpsed a fleeting expression of disgust and disappointment cross George Dunlap's features. Kicking at the knife handle, Hatfield snapped the steel blade and sent the haft flying against the far wall.

"Whoever sent him better send a man next time," Hatfield said clearly. "Or better yet, be man enough to come himself."

Dunlap's face was wholly blank.

A deputy dragged the unconscious Mexican off to jail, and Hatfield had his drink then. He took a second one, the bartender setting it up on the house, but he stood with his back to the wood, wishing that Dunlap would make a play of his own.

Hatfield was positive that Dunlap had set the Mex knifeman on him, and if that Mexican had thrown his blade instead of trying to rush in, Hatfield knew he himself would now be lying in the sawdust here. When he pushed through the batwings and went outside, they were hitching a fresh team into the traces, greasing the axles, and inspecting wheels and thoroughbraces. Getting ready to roll.

Hatfield had an idea that after that incident in the saloon Dunlap might stay overnight in Pueblo Springs. But when the copper horn blared its warning, George Dunlap appeared and climbed aboard with the others, to ride on through the darkness.

CHAPTER II

Elkhorn Station

AT ELKHORN, the owner of the station, Celinda Moore, welcomed the coach passengers with the winsome smile and easy, gracious manner for which she was known all up and down the road. Lunch awaited, and the upstairs bedrooms were ready.

A striking woman with a well-curved shapeliness, rich chestnut hair, candid hazel eyes, and clear, refined features, Celinda was the widow of a trusted Butterfield employee. She had been given this agency as a token of appreciation for her husband's services, and she had made it one of the cleanest and best stations on the route.

Her assistant, Vince Barlee, a burly, amiable man, added his jovial greetings and lounged lazily out to help with the baggage. Both he and Celinda seemed pleased at seeing Hatfield, whom they knew by the name of Jimson, an alias he had used when he had been here before, posing as a cattle and land buyer.

When everybody was settled, the horses stabled, and the express packages stored inside the depot, Barlee turned barkeeper for the men, and Celinda presided over the lunch counter. Her sandwiches and coffee, like her regular meals, were a treat after the tasteless fare served elsewhere along the road.

After a couple of whiskeys, Hatfield left Shannon and Metz at the bar with Vince Barlee, and bought a couple of sandwiches and a cup of coffee from Celinda. The milliner was chatting with

the drummer, while the dance-hall girl tried to flirt with George Dunlap. The silent, wizened little horse trader had already retired to his room with a sandwich and coffee.

"Lost another shipment yesterday out near Apache Wells," Celinda Moore told Jim Hatfield, with a sorrowful shake of her chestnut head. "Got away with the stage-coach as usual, a shipment of gold dust, and the money and valuables of the passengers. Nobody killed this time, thank the Lord, but this division will soon be out of horses and stages. I don't know why Squire Stoneham hasn't called in the Rangers."

"Maybe he has," Hatfield drawled.

"Well, they couldn't spare more than two or three men anyway." Celinda gestured despairingly. "What can two or three do against an army of outlaws?"

"Sometimes they accomplish quite a lot against such odds," Hatfield reminded.

"Yes, I suppose they do," Celinda agreed reluctantly. "But this is no ordinary bunch of bandits at work around here, I'm afraid, Mr. Jimson. There are brains behind the guns in this case, it seems."

Hatfield nodded. "And it certainly seems to me as if someone on the inside was tipping off the raiders, Mrs. Moore."

"It does look that way," she admitted. "But all the workers between here and El Paso are old and faithful Butterfield people. I can't imagine any one of them betraying the company.—But I shouldn't burden you with our worries. The road agents are not interested in stealing cattle or land."

Hatfield murmured, "Mrs. Moore, your worries concern everybody in Texas who cares anything about the welfare of the state. The Butterfield Line is an honored and highly important institution in this country, a vital asset in helping the state grow." He finished his coffee and smiled down at her. "Your grub always takes me back to my boyhood at home, Mrs. Moore.—Thanks for looking after my horse since I've been gone. Reckon I'll go out and have a look at him now."

Her smile lighted her cameo features and hazel eyes. "The boys have taken good care of that splendid sorrel, Mr. Jimson."

Hatfield nodded. "I'm sure they did. It's going to feel good to sit a saddle on him again."

"Are you leaving the coach here?" Celinda asked.

"I think so. Ridden enough stages lately to last me a long time. And I don't want to shuck out my hard-earned dinero to a bunch of border-riffraff on the way to El Paso."

"Oh, they won't strike again this soon," she declared.

"Maybe not." He shrugged. "But I want to straddle leather anyway, and that horse'll be needing the exercise."

HATFIELD touched his hatbrim and turned out through the back door, crossing the shadowy rear compound to the lantern-lit arch of the huge barn. He liked Celinda Moore—a woman of courage and character, as well as charm. Barlee was likable enough, too, but there was an indolent, easy-going, devil-may-care streak in the big fellow, and maybe not too much integrity. The leak might be there unbeknown to Celinda. The ranger wondered exactly what relationship existed between those two. Barlee was more than a hired man, but certainly less than a lover, Hatfield estimated. Yet there was something between them, binding them fairly close.

Goldy, the ranger's big sorrel mount, in a stall for the night after running in the corral all day, whickered with soft delight at sight of Hatfield who let the horse muzzle him, stroking the dark mane and golden flank. While he fed the sorrel a handful of oats, he talked to the mount like one man to another, and Goldy did his best to talk back.

A small Negro stableboy stood watching, bugged eyes and bared teeth white in the gloom.

"Ain't he one helluva horse, mistah?" exclaimed the kid, in awed, deep-South tones. "The mostest horse I evah did see,

and that's a fack! Man up on a horse like that got the world by the tail on a downhill drag."

Hatfield grinned and flipped the boy a coin, and went back to petting the great, tall, streamlined sorrel—three hands higher than the average range bronc. Goldy had been brushed and curried until his hide gleamed with golden radiance, his mane and tail flowing in dark glossy contrast. Those thoroughbred lines showed speed and strength, power and stamina, and the liquid eyes brimmed with alert intelligence.

It was some time before Hatfield left the stable, and the rambling depot was darkened for the most part when he crossed the yard. A night lamp was turned down low in the deserted main room. Apparently everyone had gone to bed. Hatfield wondered whimsically if the honkytonk belle had succeeded in enticing George Dunlap.

Considerably rested now, and wide awake, the Ranger decided to walk around for awhile, limber up his legs and breathe in the fresh, gusty night air, before going to bed himself. Aimlessly crossing the highway, he sauntered along sandy dunes spiced with sage, and tangled with mescal and greasewood. Screw beans rustled in their pods, and bladed yucca clashed drily in the breeze.

Once when he looked back at the clustered buildings of the station, he saw that the lamps in the bedrooms had all been extinguished, but that a light was flashing erratically from one of the central windows of the main building—the upper hall window, he figured.

A signal of some kind to watchers out on the plain! Dots and dashes! But he soon discovered that some other code than Morse was being used. But what was much plainer to the Lone Wolf was that without a doubt somebody in the depot was in communication with the desperadoes from beyond the Rio Grande, the scourge of the Butterfield Stage-coach Line!

The first name to come to the Ranger's mind was that of George Dunlap. But it could be Vince Barlee. It might be almost any one of them, even the aloof little trader or the innocuous drummer, the genial milliner or the acid-tongued scarlet lady.

Hatfield was too far away to get back and apprehend the signaler before he could disappear, so he waited for some time after the light ceased blinking before he walked back toward the depot in the shadows. One thing was clear to him now—the westbound stage would be held up tomorrow, somewhere between here and El Paso. But Jim Hatfield was not going to be on board. He would be traveling on Goldy to protect the coach, if possible, or at least pick up the trail of the road agents while it was still warm.

WITH Dunlap on the coach, it might well be fatal for the Ranger to be along as a passenger. For if the stage should be attacked, Dunlap would be certain to point him out as a Ranger—Hatfield was certain now that the man knew his identity—and the bandits would break their rule of not molesting passengers, long enough to kill Jim Hatfield.

It was a good thing that Dunlap was not a clever man, or Hatfield might have gone on riding the coach. But Dunlap had given his hand away almost from the start, and what had happened in Pueblo Springs had clinched it in the Lone Wolf's mind. Dunlap suspected or knew, as Hatfield believed—that the tall passenger was a lawman, and despite his guise of respectability, Dunlap had no use for officers of the law.

In the morning Hatfield planned to warn the other passengers against going on in the Concord. He'd bet ten-to-one that George Dunlap would stay with the stage, though, and curse Hatfield and the rest as cowards, for not remaining aboard.

The interior of the stage station was still, and apparently everybody was slumbering when Hatfield lit a lamp and carried his warbag upstairs to the room he had occupied before. He laid out his range clothes and new double-holstered shell belt ready for tomorrow, and took

off the dirty wrinkled gray suit with relief. He'd been dressed like a dude long enough—too long.

He packed the suit and short-barreled pistol in its shoulder rig. It would be good to wear his guns again, slung on his hips where they belonged. Some time when he had that shoulder holster on he'd be a shade slow in reaching across his chest, and that would be it. Those underarm rigs were for gamblers and Fancy Dans, but sometimes a two-gun Ranger had to disguise himself a little. Even if he felt naked when not gunhung.

The bed was remarkably clean, fresh and comfortable, for this rough frontier land. Hatfield settled down with pleasure. Disciplining his brain to stop thinking, his body to relax, he was soon asleep with the sixgun resting close at hand.

CHAPTER III

Murder, Pure and Simple

IN THE morning Hatfield had a long talk with Shannon and Metz in the stable, and told the Negro stableboy he'd want the sorrel saddled and ready after the stage pulled out.

At breakfast the other passengers were upset to learn that Hatfield was leaving the coach here. The plump milliner from Tucson seemed to have been more or less looking to him for protection, and she began to fret about the funds she was carrying. The drummer turned a little greenish, and the horse trader fingered his money-belt nervously under the table, both having gained the impression that their fellow passenger was leaving them because he feared a holdup. The dance-hall wench, whose name was Sheila, only laughed and said she had nothing to lose but her virtue.

George Dunlap turned on Hatfield in anger and disgust. "What's the matter with you, man? Surely you're not the fool and coward you're acting this morning. No passengers have ever been hurt on this road, even when there's *been* a holdup!"

"Plenty of them have been robbed and set afoot miles from the nearest settlement," Hatfield said mildly.

"How do you expect people to get where they're going if you scare them off the stage?" demanded the domineering Dunlap, face red enough to hint at apoplexy.

"I'm not trying to scare anybody, or tell anyone how to travel," said Hatfield. "I haven't said anything about being afraid of any holdup, either. It's just that I happen to have a horse here—left him here when I passed through not long ago on a buying trip—and I'm going to ride him. Have you any objections, mister?"

"Naturally not. Good riddance, I say. But I can't see these other folks stranding themselves here in the middle of nowhere, just because *you're* afraid of meeting up with bandits."

"*I* like it here," the milliner said sweetly. "There'll be other stages, and the bandits can't steal them all. I need a rest, anyway, and this is a good place to take one. With your kind permission, Mr. Dunlap, I think I'll stay awhile."

"My stomach's all knocked out," the salesman said apologetically. "I'm really in no condition to travel today."

"Reckon I'll lay over myself," drawled the old horse dealer, still fondling the bulge of the money-belt under his cheap fraved shirt.

When the stage-coach was ready to roll, Dunlap and the girl, Sheila, were the only passengers aboard.

Hatfield spoke quietly to Metz before the gun guard climbed up into the boot with Shannon. "Don't try to fight them off, Dutch," he advised. "It's suicide against such odds. I'll cover as close as I can, and you get a line on which way they run."

"Bring along a couple of horses, for us, Jimson, and we'll ride with you, in case that's what's planned for us," Metz said. "I got an idea that sidewinder Dunlap and the fancy gal will take off with the

"You're covered, mister! Get 'em up and hold still."

owlhoots, in case we do get hung up."

Hatfield nodded and stepped back, to stand with the others and watch the Concord roll on westward in the early morning light.

When the coach was out of sight, Hatfield told Vince Barlee he wanted two extra saddle broncs to take along, and Vince started back to relay the instructions to the hostlers.

The horse trader called after him, "Saddle one up for me, too. Reckon I'll hire a nag and ride along with you, Jimson, if you ain't got any objections."

"Why, glad to have you," Hatfield said, hiding his surprise.

"Name's Stebbins," the wizened old-timer said, as he came up to Hatfield, hauling a gun and belt out of his carpetbag and strapping them on. "Ain't forgot how to shoot, I reckon," he mumbled, apologetically. Picking up a Spencer carbine, he checked it carefully.

Celinda Moore called Hatfield into the dining room for another cup of coffee.

"Wish you'd stay awhile, Mr. Jimson," she said frankly. "We see a lot of people here, but not many that I'd say that to."

"Thanks, Mrs. Moore. I sure appreciate it, and I'd like to hang around here—but there's business in El Paso. Always something to take the pleasure out of life. I'll be back this way, though."

"I hope so," she sighed. She leaned forward, regarding him with open interest and appreciation, holding him with the warm light in her eyes, the ripe fullness of her lips.

HATFIELD settled his bill and broke away as soon as he could without offending or hurting her, and walked out to the stables with Stebbins. Three saddled horses were ready, but Goldy was nowhere in sight. A hostler said someone had made a mistake and turned the sorrel out to pasture this morning. Vince Barlee was out now trying to catch the big yellow horse.

Hatfield whistled a blast out over the grassland, with difficulty curbing his annoyance and growing anger. He should be on the road right now, keeping the stage-coach in sight and watching for the holdup. It looked as if someone was trying to delay him here, until it would be practically impossible for him to overtake the Concord.

Dunlap could have bribed one of the stableboys. Or maybe Barlee or one of the hostlers was hooked up with the renegades. There was something off-color right here at Elkhorn, and no mistake. But Hatfield didn't have time to investigate it this morning. He whistled another piercing note to Goldy.

The minutes passed with painful slowness, as old Stebbins lounged against a feed-box and Hatfield paced to and fro under the archway. With two horses to lead, they'd never catch up with the stage now. And it was more essential to overhaul the coach and spot the crooks, than it was to bring mounts for Metz and Shannon.

"Pick the pony you want, Stebbins," said the Ranger. "Late as we are, we won't try to drag that extra pair along. If the boys lose their wheels, they'll have to hoof it to the nearest ranch."

When Vince Barlee finally rode in with Goldy on a lead rope, he was sweating and swearing, damning a certain leather-headed stablehand and apologizing profusely to Hatfield.

"Never would of caught this big devil, if you hadn't whistled out to him, Jimson," he panted. "Couldn't get a rope near him till he heard your call and let me."

Hatfield threw his own gear onto the sorrel, and told Barlee they weren't taking the extra horses.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am this happened," Barlee said, genuinely worried. "Don't know what that damn kid was thinking of, unless it was he couldn't bear to part with this horse of yours."

"It's all right, Vince," said Hatfield. Tightening his cinches, he checked every strap and piece of equipment. "See you before long probably. Take good care of the place—and Celinda."

"Sure will," promised Barlee, with his expansive boyish grin and excessively friendly gestures.

Once on the trail, he and the old horse trader made good time, gaining steadily and raising distant views of the coach's dust plumes, but never closing up enough to bring the vehicle within sight or reach. Stebbins, who knew his business, had selected a tough, rangy coyote dun that made a good running mate for Hatfield's tremendous sorrel.

About fifteen miles out they saw a lone rider quartering toward them from the south, and Hatfield thought he recognized the easy seat and loose, lanky frame of one of his partners, Milt Travers. It was the blond Ranger all right, up from reconnoitering along the Rio Grande, and he joined them in driving on after the stage. It didn't surprise old Stebbins to hear Travers call Hatfield "Jim," since the horse trader also knew the big Ranger as Jimson, cattle buyer. But if he got other ideas before long, he kept them to himself.

"Rumors of a new stage-coach line on the Mexican side," Travers told them when they slowed for a breather and got a chance to talk. "Chihauhau Coach Company. Run by a bad one named Jaun Calderon, I hear, with the upper crust of the Border scum in his crew. Gun-heavy gents, known badmen and owlhoots like Estabol, Russo, *El Gavilan*, Martinez, and Lobo Lash. A nice bunch of buzzards, Jim. No doubt they're building the line with Butterfield's stages. Tough to get at over there, too."

"They've got agents on this side, Milt," said Hatfield. "And some of them are

planted right in the Butterfield organization."

Travers nodded soberly. "Red and the Fox have seen some odd-looking jiggers slipping in and out of the Division Office in El Paso. Could be a leak right in Squire Stoneham's staff, I reckon. That secretary of his—that Rita Farrell—has got a cold and hungry look about her, for my money. A girl with big ambitions. A girl who'd trade 'most anything she's got for luxuries. That's what comes of a man letting a woman—any woman—get a foothold in doing man's work."

HATFIELD protested. "If Rita was crooked, Milt, she wouldn't last long with Asa Stoneham."

"You can't always tell about women, Jim," disagreed Travers. "Especially one as good looking and well built as Rita Farrell."

"I doubt if Stoneham's susceptible, though."

Milt Travers laughed softly. "Any man's liable to be susceptible to the right woman—or should I say, wrong woman? To a certain combination of feminine charms, Jim. Maybe he wasn't so loco as some say, taking a woman into the business office."

"Well, we'll see, Milt," said Hatfield. "But right now we ought to be running down this stage-coach."

As they rode on they tried hard to close the gap, hitting a terrific racking pace along the highway, but they were too late, as Hatfield had feared they would be. They knew it when they heard flat, wind-torn shots in the distance.

The driver and guard? They were afraid so, for there was a lot of shooting, too much to be aimless and harmless. Metz and Shannon must have tried to make a fight of it! Or maybe they'd been murdered in cold blood! If Dunlap *was* one of the outlaw gang he might have insisted on killing those men, to prevent their identifying him later on.

When they reached the scene of the holdup the stage was gone. It had been driven off the road and across the broken scrub-wooded plains to the south. The smell of dust and gunpowder still hovered in the brilliant midday heat, and the dirt and grass had been gouged and trampled over a wide area. In the blood-spattered weeds of a nearby arroyo, they found the riddled, lifeless bodies of Pat Shannon and Dutch Metz, literally shot to pieces by the killers. Their weapons were gone, but Hatfield would have bet that they had not been fired.

This was murder, pure and simple. A double murder, because George Dunlap couldn't risk being recognized by the stage driver and guard. Dunlap and the dance-hall floozy, Sheila, had gone with the raiders, either in the coach or on spare horses the bandits had brought along. And certainly not as captives, Hatfield thought bitterly.

They buried Metz and Shannon in temporary graves, cairned up by rocks against the carrion birds and creatures of the wilderness, and took up the southward trace of the stolen stage-coach with its escort of twenty-odd outlaws.

When they came to the place where a single horseman diverged from the bunch to travel westward, Hatfield felt sure that rider had been George Dunlap, still intent on working this side of the Border. He decided to take after the lone rider, and let Travers follow the main party, at his own discretion. What Stebbins wanted to do from here on was up to himself, of course.

The little horse trader considered briefly, and said, "Reckon I'll ride on with this yellow-haired boy here, if he don't mind my company. Ain't crossed the Rio into Old Mexico for some spell. Kinda like to see what it looks like on the other side again."

"You're more than welcome, Steb," drawled Milt Travers. "But we might have trouble getting out of there."

"I can stand it, son," Stebbins said gruffly. "Ain't had no excitement in quite awhile. Maybe what I need. And I wouldn't mind potting some of them stinking skunks, before I lay down my cards for good."

"Play it careful, Milt," said Hatfield. "And meet us back in El Paso. Take care of the kid, Steb. He's still pretty green."

"Yeah, I can see that," Stebbins said drily. "I'll give him all the benefit of my age and experience and wisdom, Jim." And he grinned. "Plumb glad I know now it's Hatfield—not Jimson."

Jim Hatfield watched them drift along on the cross-country trail of the renegades, southwest toward the Rio Grande and Mexico. Then he turned Goldy into the northwest on the tracks of that single rider, in the general direction of El Paso. He hoped it was George Dunlap. He wanted that man very much indeed.

CHAPTER IV

Apache Wells

HATFIELD was picking up ground on his quarry all afternoon, but darkness closed in before he could overhaul the rider ahead.

When the scattered lights of a settlement sparkled through the night, Hatfield knew it must be Apache Wells and figured that the rider would doubtless head in there. According to what Celinda Moore had said, yesterday's stage had been taken in this vicinity, and perhaps a few of the raiders were still lurking hereabouts.

There were Americans as well as Mexicans in the band, and some of them—like George Dunlap—did their work on this side of the Line. Possibly Dunlap was planning a rendezvous with some of his associates in Apache Wells.

The town was dark except for lighted windows and doorways, and Hatfield made the rounds with watchful eyes and ready hands. There was danger in virtually every town he rode into, but he sensed it stronger than ever here. From every dark alley, corner, window and door, he half-expected a gun to blast at him, but nothing happened as he scouted the community. A supper-hour quiet prevailed, and even the saloons were hushed and still. It was more ominous than noisy, raucous hilarity would have been.

The Lone Wolf lived on the side of law and order, yet his life was similar to that of a hunted fugitive. He could seldom if ever relax his vigilance. His enemies were legion—friends, relatives and confederates of all the innumerable badmen he had killed or brought to justice. Sworn to kill him on sight, and not particular as to how they did it.

Sometimes the Ranger realized that sheer luck often kept him alive. For as good, and as quick as he was with his guns, there was no adequate defense against bullets in the back. If fortune hadn't ridden with him, Jim Hatfield would have been underground long before. Speed, skill and strength, nerve and courage, were not enough—without luck.

Sooner or later, though, a man's streak of good luck was bound to break, and his string run out. Then that shot from ambush would find its mark, or that knife in the dark would reach a vital spot, or the overwhelming number and weight of his enemies would crush the life out of him. Well, a man in this kind of work had to expect that, and there was no sense in worrying about it in advance. Nothing to do but play the cards as they came, the best way he knew how, and never let up as long as he had a chip left.

Hatfield made another turn around the streets, with Goldy at a slow walk, and this trip he glimpsed something through an alley that froze him in the leather. Within the sagging lantern-lit arch of a ramshackle livery barn, a man in store clothes was dragging saddle gear off a salt-rimmed red roan. And that man was George Dunlap. There was nobody else in sight.

Circling to the rear of the barn, Hatfield found a hostler forking hay into the corral feed racks, and conferred quietly with the man. There was no back entrance to the stable. He'd better leave his horse in the alley, and prowl around to the front.

The liveryman looked at Hatfield's sil-

ver star and agreed to keep out of the way until the big Ranger had subdued his man. Jim Hatfield wanted to take Dunlap alive and learn all he could about the organization that was warring with such brutal ruthlessness against the Butterfield Stage Line.

Leaving Goldy in the dark passage between the barn and shed, the Ranger loosened his Colts in the leather and crept warily to the front of the building. Dunlap had hung up his gear, stalled the roan, and was washing up in the trough beside the arched entrance. Hatfield stepped out behind him, and said:

"You're covered, mister! Get 'em up and hold still."

Even then Dunlap tried to draw, wet hand clawing at his shoulder holster, but Hatfield rammed into his back and pinned him against the trough, wrenching his right hand back and twisting the pistol out of it. Dunlap fought back with amazing strength and fury, butting his head into Hatfield's face, kicking and stamping with booted feet, bucking the Ranger off with sudden explosive violence.

Staggering backward Hatfield got tangled up in his own spurs, tripping and falling flat on his shoulder-blades. Dunlap whirled off the trough and charged like a maniac, jumping his spiked heels at Hatfield's face, but the Ranger rolled away barely in time and grappled the man about the legs, heaving and spilling him in the dirt.

Dunlap was threshing about like mad when Hatfield landed on top of him with grinding force, clubbing both fists into that snarling face like great trip-hammers. Blood spurted and streamed, but George Dunlap went on struggling with insane ferocity, finally getting his legs up and booting the Ranger off and over backward into the gravel.

Up first, Dunlap rushed and lashed out with a pointed-toe boot, but Hatfield rolled into his legs and threw him in a thrashing tangle. Both men floundered and slugged as they tumbled around in the weltering dust. Hatfield had expected no such resistance as this from a character like Dunlap. The man fought like a wounded wildcat in a corner, striking, clawing, slashing with everything he had.

They fell apart on the ground, torn loose by the fury of their efforts, and came up together this time to meet head-on. Hatfield struck with the speed of light now, left and right. Dunlap went jerking and reeling backward into the barn, neck unhinged and legs disjointed by the whipping blows. In this kind of battle, Dunlap couldn't stand up to Hatfield for any time at all.

Following on the jump, the lawman beat Dunlap against the wall, hooked him left and right, and dropped him in a broken bloody heap on the straw. Dunlap wallowed there, moaning, sobbing, blowing out splintered teeth and blood. But somehow he managed to get up again and launched a terrible kick at the Ranger's crotch. Hatfield slid aside, caught the upswinging leg, and flipped the man over in a complete somersault.

Dunlap came scrambling forward on all fours like a bloody, snarling jungle beast, and Hatfield smashed a knee into his face and felt the cartilage of that Roman nose give in under the driving kneecap. Dunlap rolled backward in a scarlet shower, screaming and groaning, but somehow coming upright once more. Ripping a pitchfork off the wall, he spun and lunged with the sharp steel tines at Hatfield's face, but Jim ducked and drove in beneath the fork, wresting it from the man's hands and flinging it aside.

With another strangled scream, George Dunlap clawed at the Ranger's slitted gray eyes, but Hatfield sunk a fist deep in the belly to double the outlaw over. Then Jim struck upward into the dripping red down-turned face, lifting the man stiffly erect, taller than normal. As Dunlap tottered there, extended on tiptoe, Hatfield hit him with a left and a right, snapping Dunlap's neck and all but tearing the man's head off his shoulders. The fellow slammed the wall hard enough to rock the building, and dust and hay chaff rained down as he fell forward and sprawled slack and senseless on his mu-

tilated face in the straw and filth of the stable floor.

Hatfield went out to the trough to wash his face and hands, picked up the man's pistol, and came back to lean on a grain box and wait for Dunlap to regain consciousness. There was a lot of talking he wanted to hear this George Dunlap do, and it shouldn't be hard to loosen his tongue after a beating like that. Dunlap wouldn't be in condition to stand much more; that was a cinch.

You never could tell who was going to put up the most fight, Hatfield reflected. He would have figured Dunlap to be fairly easy meat, but he had licked a lot of men who were bigger, stronger and faster, without half the trouble Dunlap had given him here. Of course Hatfield had gotten off to a poor start in this scrap, and that had aided Dunlap until the Ranger had finally got squared off face-to-face with him.

Hatfield's breathing gradually slowed to normal, his heart and pulse calming in ratio, and the sweat cooling and drying on his great rangy frame. He was moving to douse the lantern light, for safety's sake, when hoofbeats hammered into the driveway toward the livery barn, and lead snarled through the open arch as gunflames speared out from the riders of three galloping horses.

HITTING the floor instantly, the Lone Wolf rolled into the first empty stall, with slugs chewing wood and kicking up hay dust all around him. He still held Dunlap's gun and he fired two shots from it, as the horsemen swept past the wide doorway with their pistols flashing and roaring. They made their turn in the yard and came thundering back to slash more shots in under the archway as they hurtled by.

Hatfield was blasting back at them when he noticed that George Dunlap's body was shuddering and twitching in the straw, ripped and torn by bullets from that trio of night riders. Dirt and splinters spouted up about Dunlap as the lead buffeted and shook him, and Hatfield knew then that he nor anyone else would ever hear George Dunlap do any more talking. Those three hellions had seen to that.

The lantern had been shot out, now that it was too late to save Dunlap, but the attackers made one more pass in front of the barn door, raking the interior with gunfire. Hatfield emptied Dunlap's pistol at them, and pulled out his own right-hand Colt, but the raiders were on the run now, the drum of hooves rapidly receding in the night.

They had looked to be Mexicans, he thought, even though they wore Texas range clothes and hats. And they had made damn sure that Dunlap wouldn't spill any information to the law.

Hatfield got up, holstered his gun, dusted his clothing, and paused for an unnecessary final glance at George Dunlap. The man's body was as full of holes as those of Shannon and Metz had been. There was some poetic justice in that, although it didn't do anything for the Irishman and the Dutchman. Anyhow, Dunlap had set up his last Butterfield stage-coach for the Chihuahua Coach Company, if that was the outfit which had employed him.

In the stillness after the racketing gunshots, Hatfield could hear the diminishing rataplan of hoofbeats off in the south, and he decided to take after that trio. Whistling up Goldy, he took the reins and swung aboard, riding out at full tilt before townspeople could come swarming into the livery yard. The moon had risen now, and with his skill at reading sign he should be able to trace those three gunmen.

They were probably fanning the breeze for the Border. Well, Milt Travers and Stebbins were down that way, so Hatfield might as well follow them onto foreign soil, although that was something not condoned.

For a stretch he could follow the three horses by ear. Then the sounds faded out, and he had to hunt up the hoofprints and use his eyesignt in the tricky moon-dappled shadows. He also had to watch

out for ambuscades along the way.

He lost the tracks for an interval, finally doubling back and discovering where they bent abruptly westward in the direction of El Paso. That was all right, too. Asa Stoneham and his division headquarters office and staff were in that extreme western town of Texas. Red Bouchard and Fox Edley were working in that territory, too. And it was always just as well to stay on this side of the Rio Grande, insofar as possible, for below the Border the odds were stacked enormously high against Texans in general, who dared defy international law by entering foreign territory, and against Rangers in particular.

With Goldy eating up ground in that long effortless gait, Jim Hatfield rode on under vast starry heavens into the wide Western night.

CHAPTER V

Deadfall in Damirez

JUST about the time Jim Hatfield hit the trail out of Apache Wells, Milt Travers and old Stebbins were warily approaching the flare-lit adobes of the Mexican pueblo of Damirez. The bandits and the stolen coach they were convinced, had preceded them here. The conviction became absolute when they saw a mud-walled wagon yard at the edge of town, where a flaming tar barrel illuminated a large gaudy sign:

CHIHUAHUA COACH COMPANY

From a nearby sandhill they could see into the enclosure. A dozen or more stage-coaches stood ranked within the adobe walls, and men were working on another by the light of torches and lanterns. The vehicles had been renovated and repainted, but they were obviously Concords and indubitably from the Butterfield Stage Line.

In addition to those in the open compound, there probably were other stages inside the long wagon shed. The barn and corrals were filled with horses and equipment stolen from the same source.

Milt Travers swore softly. "There they are, Steb. But it'd take a regiment to get them back across the river into Texas."

Stebbins spat tobacco juice. "Yeah, maybe two regiments."

"Well, John Butterfield can get the Army out after them, if anybody can," Travers said. "Now that we can tell him right where they are. The Chihuahua Coach Company's liable to be a pretty short-lived enterprise."

Stebbins nodded at the garish clusters of adobe buildings. "You figuring on going into that hell-hole son?"

Travers thought it over. "Long as we've come this far, we ought to have a look at Damirez, Steb."

"I suppose so," sighed Stebbins. "But it ain't apt to be healthy for us in there, Milt. Specially you with that yellow hair."

"I'll darken it up a little, where it shows under my hat," Travers said, squatting to make a mixture of dirt and gun oil to darken his hair.

He knew from experience that fair-haired *Tejanos* coming into this country were hated even more than were any others. By the men of Mexico, at least. The senoritas often felt different about the matter.

"You and Jim being Rangers," said Stebbins, matter-of-factly, "if anybody recognizes you as one in there, they'll cut you up in small chunks and feed you to the dogs."

"That's the chance a Ranger has to take on this side, Steb," drawled Travers. "You wouldn't want us to back off, scared would you?"

Stebbins grunted. "Son," he said. "I know men about as well as I know horses, and I'd pick you and Jim Hatfield for my remuda any time. It don't make any odds whether you pack a badge or not. You'll do to take along."

"Thanks, Steb," said Travers. "And I'm mighty glad to have a man like you beside me down here."

Stebbins smiled one of his rare, wrinkled smiles. "So we're even, Milt. And

I hope we ride out of this Mex sink-hole like we come in—together and whole."

They split up to enter town separately. Meeting later behind a large adobe on the outskirts they tied their mounts there, then parted again to wander along opposite sides of the narrow street, covering one another without seeming to.

There were many other Americans in Damirez, most of them probably fugitives, but the atmosphere was distinctly foreign and hostile. Milt Travers felt the hollow chill and queer prickle, an eerie and lonely sensation, that always afflicted him in Mexican settlements. The feeling of a stranger, far from home and masquerading dangerously in an enemy stronghold.

He thought, maybe we were foolish to come in here. When we found out where the coaches are cached we maybe should have ridden back to El Paso with our information. What else can we learn here, except how hard Mexican bullets hit, or how sharp Mex knives are kept?

But he wanted to get a look at some of the outlaws, if possible. Travers liked to know who he was fighting.

IN ONE of the gayest cantinas, he nursed a drink at a little table and watched a dark-skinned girl writhe through the wanton contortions of a primitive dance, to the raw beat of jungle music. Massed around him were Mexican men and women in colorful garb, their eyes bright with suspicion and enmity when they fell upon his lean Nordic features.

Yes, it had been a mistake to come in here, Travers thought, sweating in the hot, smoky room. But as he saw Stebbins lounging by the door, he felt a trifle better.

A group of men swaggered out of a back room like world conquerors, with people making way for them in a kind of awed fear; and Travers suspected he was looking at the bandit chieftains. Routing the customers from a long table not far from Travers, these men sat down with lordly airs, while waiters flocked obsequiously around to do their bidding. The table was soon covered with glittering bottles and glasses, and laden with highly-spiced dishes. The notables fell to drinking and eating with greedy gusto, watching the dancer with lecherous eyes as they swilled liquor and food down.

Travers caught the names that were bandied about the festive board, and was able to attach them to the individuals, in some cases. Juan, at the head of the table, was undoubtedly Juan Calderon, the big boss. Broad and heavy, but light of movement, with bold, cruel features. The vicious outlaw known as *El Gavilan*, the Hawk, was slim and debonair, smiling and deadly. Estabol looked like a Castilian aristocrat, cool, calm and infinitely bored; contemptuous when he glanced at companions like Russo, an ugly, hulking brute with a pockmarked face, fat yet powerful.

The man called Martinez had the intense burning look of a fanatic, and was probably as formidable as any of that murderous crew. Lobo Lash, a half-breed, was squat and solid, with a reptilian head and features of concentrated viciousness.

There were others, but those six were the leaders, the worst of an evil lot. And they were eying Travers's clean-cut American face and figure with a venom that he could feel at thirty feet and through all that murk.

Girls came and went at the long table, drinking, giggling, sliding from the embrace of one man to another. It was plain to see that Calderon was king here, though, and that his outfit had this town all wrapped up, in the bag for sure. The bandits could do no wrong in Damirez.

Milt Travers was glad to get a look at them, but he wished he could make himself invisible right now. He would like to whisk Stebbins and himself out of this reeking dive and over the river to Texas.

A girl came to Travers's small table then, a taunting challenge in her eyes and on her lips, a provocative thrust from her breast and hips. He wondered if the outlaws had sent her. An American girl, he observed. She squirmed into his lap, pressing against him, and perfume flooded

his senses.

He could not know, though, that watching from his place against the front wall, Stebbins had recognized the girl on the blond Ranger's knee. She was the painted girl, Sheila, who had disappeared with Dunlap and the stage-coach—and had certainly descended to her rightful level here.

"I'm Sheila," was what the girl *was* saying. "I like handsome blond boys. Let's go where we can be alone."

"What makes you think I'm blond?" Travers asked, instantly remembering that Hatfield had told him the girl on the stage had called herself Sheila. And now the bandits *had* sent her to him!

"I can tell by your face," she said. "I'll bet your hair's awful pretty." She reached for his low-pulled hat-brim.

Travers caught her wrist. "Leave the hat alone, babe."

Those Mexicans were watching him like dark vultures. And Travers knew that his life now was hanging by a single thread. He was angry at himself and at

Stebbins pulled his hat-brim lower over his wizened features, and looked from the girl to the bandit leaders. Mexicans in general were gay, fun-loving folks, the old man reflected, but their outlaw heros were pure poison. And Steb could almost tell what that hussy was saying to Milt Travers.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

A LOLLAPALOOSA

THE COWPOKES had each received their month's wages and rode madly into town to whoop it up. Some drank and watched the dancing gals. Some drank, talked and sang barber shop "harmony." And some gambled.

Shorty Adkins, a none-too-bright cowhand from the Big Q ranch decided to try his luck at poker and found a table with a seat open. He lost for a while and then drew what he figured to be an almost unbeatable hand, three aces and a pair of kings. The pot was raised several times, and when he finally was called by one of the strangers, he layed his cards down with one hand and reached for the pot with the other.

"Not too fast there, my friend," cautioned the stranger. "What you got?"

Shorty showed his full house, and the stranger layed down a hand without a pair and pulled in the chips.

"Hold on there!" yelled Shorty. "You ain't got nothing, not even a pair!"

"That, pardner," said the stranger firmly, "is a lollapaloosa. It beats anything."

Some time later Shorty got exactly the same cards the stranger had won on, and bet accordingly. The chips were a foot deep in the center of the table when he layed his cards down, shouted, "Lollapaloosa!" and reached for the pot.

"Not too fast there, my friend," again cautioned the stranger. "Only one lollapaloosa wins a night."

So saying, he hauled in the pot on a measly little old pair of deuces.

—*Al Spong*

this blatant girl, but most of all at those arrogant thieves at the long table.

"What's the matter?" pouted Sheila. "Don't you want to have some fun?"

"Not in the mood tonight," Travers said. "Beat it, babe. Back to your Mex friends."

The girl glanced at the outlaws, and let out a peal of shrill laughter. Twisting on Travers's lap, with a malicious smile, she flung his hat back on its lanyard, leaving his fine head bare and shimmering golden in the lamplight.

"Cabezablanca!" someone cried hoarsely. Whitehead! Every eye in the place was on him now. Travers felt exposed and conspicuous.

Rising with the girl in his arms, Travers dumped her rolling and screaming on the floor, upsetting chairs and tables.

Lobo Lash, the half-breed, came ploughing toward him, with a savage yell.

"I'll twist his neck and tear him apart! Stand back, men—he's mine!" Lash came on, stocky and compact, shouldered like a buffalo.

Milt Travers struck so fast that gasps swept the room. The impact crashed with an explosive sound, and the half-breed's reptile-like head rocked back on his massive shoulders. Lobo Lash lurched backward and down, carrying others with him into the splintering wreckage of tables and chairs.

"I'll feex that gringo dog!" bellowed the brutish, pockmarked Russo, charging like some bloated monster at the tall, slender Ranger.

Travers lunged to meet him, lashing out with another lightning punch into that pocked face, and ripping home his right as Russo started to fall. The man's huge bulk landed across the long table, which collapsed beneath him with the jangling smash of wood, crockery and glassware.

Russo's outflung limbs floored some of his companions in the tangled debris. While they were thrashing about, Milt Travers, Colt in hand now, headed for the door, slashing with the barrel at anyone who got in his way, hacking through the turmoil.

He made the doorway, chopping left and right with his gun, but a Mexican jumped at his back with a knife as he reached the batwings. Stebbins's .44 flamed, roared loudly, beating the knifeman backward to the floor. The two Texans slammed outside, leaving a chaotic uproar behind them, but with volunteer pursuers already beginning to emerge from the chaos and surge doorward.

"Run for the horses, Steb!" panted Travers, and the old-timer tore off.

Travers snatched a rawhide riata off the nearest saddle, flipped a loop over a sawed-off stump at the far end of the ramada, and made the lariat fast to a post at the other corner of the adobe. The rawhide was stretched taut and low across the cantina entrance. As Mexicans came rushing out, three abreast, to trip and roll wildly over the ankle-high rope, others poured out and piled on top of the leaders. Quickly the porch was buried deep in writhing, struggling men, cursing and grunting and fighting one another in their frenzied efforts to get untangled.

Milt Travers was running after Stebbins, laughing with reckless, boyish delight, when a bronco busted lose from a tie-rail and barreled into him in panicky flight. Travers smashed off at a spinning tangent by the driving shoulder of the horse, jarred numb and breathless, lost his footing and tumbled headfirst into the dust.

When he got up, dazed and groggy, the first of the pursuers were bearing down on him. It was too late for further running for the horses and Travers broke for the mouth of the nearest alley. The Mexicans were shooting now, but not trying too hard to hit him. They wanted this *cabezablanca* alive, for he could afford them real amusement and pleasure. Death by bullets was too easy for a gringo like this one.

With lead howling around him, kicking up dirt and eating into adobe, Travers was just plunging into that sheltering alley when a frightened hound bolted in under his flying boots. Legs cut from under him with shocking suddenness, he

went headlong through dark space, sliding on his chest in gravel until his skull butted a solid 'dobe wall. Lights flared and rocketed blindingly in his brain, and his head felt jammed down between his shoulder-blades.

Stunned and sick, Milt Travers clung to the ragged fringes of consciousness, thinking bitterly, A horse and a dog. The difference between escape and this.

He tried to move, to get up and go on, but his arms and legs refused to work. He couldn't move. He was helpless.

Stark horror engulfed him as he thought, If a bunch of lobos like these find my badge in its secret place in my belt, I won't die easy.

He had seen the bodies of other Rangers, lashed across their horses and sent back to Texas from places like Damirez. He hoped old Steb was clear and leathering that dun for the Rio.

He made one more attempt to move, then gave up. In a few seconds more Mexican bandits were all over him, mauling and grinding him into the earth, smothering him beneath a ravaging wolf pack of bodies. He was grateful when a clout on the head drove him all the way into the bottomless pit of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER VI

El Paso Del Norte

SWEATING in a musty cobwebbed loft of an old tool shed, Red Bouchard and Fox Edley chewed tobacco and watched the back yard of the Butterfield Stage Office, in El Paso. Afternoon sun poured through the leaky roof, and dust motes swirled in its golden beams. The trapped heat was suffocating, and the Rangers panted and longed for open air and cold water—or beer.

"Somebody in that office has a helluva lot of traffic with Mexicans," Bouchard remarked, fingering his well-trimmed red beard. "Seems like every Mex that comes across from Juarez heads in there, one time or another, and always the back way."

"It can't be Stoneham," Edley said, thoughtfully knuckling his lean, sharp-featured face. "If the Squire wasn't on the road so much he'd probably catch on to whatever undercover stuff is being pulled off here. But one man can't be everywhere at once. Asa trusts his staff, and at least one of 'em is crookeder than a dog's hind leg."

"That woman he's got doing a man's job in his office—that Rita Farrell," said Bouchard. "Cuter'n a speckled pup, but colder'n a banker's heart. Too smart to work in a crib or dance-hall, but her morals ain't no better than some of them that do. She just wants more for what she's got to peddle, a whole helluva lot more."

Edley nodded. "She looks like somebody I've seen somewheres else, Red, but damned if I can place it in my memory."

Bouchard snorted. "A short memory's mighty convenient for a man that's led the life you have, Fox."

Edley laughed jeeringly. "At least I never had to hide out in the Nations, and turn squawman and live like a stinking Injun."

"That," said Bouchard, "was a good life. Maybe the best life a man could have, come to look back on it."

"Let's go get some beer," Edley suggested. "We loafed up in this bake-oven long enough. We ain't done much to earn our money on this job yet."

"Who has?" Bouchard asked, spitting at a horsefly. "Hatfield's wearing out his butt riding them stage-coaches back and forth, and Travers is riding himself dizzy up and down the river."

"At least they're seeing something outside of El Paso," grumbled Edley. "Come on—I'm sick of looking at spiders and flies and them red whiskers of yours."

"A beard wouldn't do any harm on a face like yours, friend," Bouchard said, then straightened to peer through the warped boards. "Three more pilgrims from the other side, Fox. Dressed like

Americans but sure enough Mexes. With mugs like them, they don't have to wear conchas and peaked sombreros.— Hm-m, they've come a long ways on them nags, and they're creaky-necked from watching the backtrail."

Fox Edley walked to a small glassless window for his look.

Three men outside dismounted to lead their tired ponies into the rear area, and disappeared among the outbuildings there. The Rangers waited another long half-hour in that stifling attic, but the trio of riders remained out of sight down there.

"Let's go down and look for them vaqueros," Fox Edley said. "I crave action, Red Bush."

Bouchard nodded and rose, a knotty stump of a man, his beard and hair fiery in the sunbeams. "We'll go scout around some, Fox, but don't go off half-cocked and start something that won't amount to a damn."

"Look who's giving advice!" Edley laughed. "The old man of the hills telling this Fox what to do. Me, who cut my teeth on a Colt gun, and grew up eating black powder."

Bouchard grinned through his whiskers. "Trouble is you never did grow up, Foxface. You're an old broke-down, stove-up mustanger now, and you've heard the owl hoot more'n any unhung culprit in the Southwest. But you just never growed up enough to think and act like a grown man."

Edley splashed tobacco juice at a knothole. "If you're an example of a grown man, I'm just as happy I never growed up, Red Bush."

They climbed down a rickety ladder and threaded their way out of the cluttered shed, turning toward the outbuildings behind the Butterfield office, with their eyes roving and their guns loosened in the leather.

It was time something broke in this case. Time they braced some of the *caballeros* who went in and out of this back yard. Maybe a taste of the barrel would start some Mex tongues wagging, and give the Rangers something to go on in this war of the stage-coaches. . . .

IT WAS afternoon when Jim Hatfield came in sight of El Paso, in the deep-notched pass where the Rio Grande cuts through the Franklin Mountains. The town lay on a mesa at the base of a mountain, with the monumental portal looming in grandeur in the background. Across the river was Juarez, Mexico. Around the settlement spread cornfields and vineyards, and high-wheeled Mexican *carretas* raised dust along the roads.

Hatfield had lost the trace he had been following in the night, but he was fairly certain the three men he was after were heading for El Paso or Juarez, and anyhow he wanted to reach the pass himself. Riding in, he looked up the sandhills to the flat mesas and spiny ridges, then higher to the barren rocky cliffs of Franklin. Beyond the mountain portals was the empty glare of deserts to the north, a sense of limitless lonely space and sweeping distance.

Wind blew through the pass as usual, raising dust and grit, and rippling the cottonwoods, cedars and poplars, the peach and chinaberry trees. Muddy water stagnated in the *acequias* that he crossed, the planks booming hollowly under Goldy's hooves. Seeds rustled in the pods of the soapweed clumps he passed.

In town there were ferns and brilliant scarlet flowers against adobe walls, bell-towered churches and missions, adobe-lined streets and open plazas.

Hatfield dismounted in the central plaza, and left the sorrel at a shaded hitch-rack. He'd do some looking around before he unsaddled. He scanned the horses about the square, but failed to find three together showing the signs of a long, hard journey. If those three were here they would be tied out back somewhere, hidden in the Mex quarter or turned into a livery barn or corral.

Suddenly he smiled with pleasure as he saw Bouchard and Edley walking toward the front entrance of the Butterfield Stage Office. As he hailed them they wheeled

back, grinning. Reaching him, they all swapped stories briefly in the shadow of an overhang. Red and Fox, unable to find those three horsemen out back, were now on their way to try the front office, they said. The riders of whom they spoke might be the three whom Hatfield had been trailing from Apache Wells, so he decided to go along with the partners to investigate.

The office was immaculate, comfortable, and almost cool, the clerks all busy with quiet efficiency, the whole aspect orderly, businesslike, and agreeable. Much of this smoothness was unquestionably due to the supervision of Rita Farrell, yet something about the handsome, polished woman had aroused the suspicions of the Rangers, even though Asa Stoneham swore by her.

She greeted them with a cool, pleasant smile, and told them that Stoneham was out of town. She had seen nothing of three Mexican men in American range garb. Was there anything that she or the staff could do for them this afternoon? She had a poise and composure that nothing could crack, and managed to make the Rangers feel awkward and ill-at-ease in the face of her casual charm.

There was something familiar about this girl, though, Hatfield thought. It had occurred to him before. Rita Farrell either looked like or reminded him of someone else he had met—somewhere.

Her hair was bright with coppery-red highlights, and her gray eyes held a greenish tinge. Her flawlessly carved features would have been severe had it not been for the lush, arched curve of her full red lips. Kissable lips, all right, but a man wouldn't be apt to take any liberties with this girl, unless at her invitation. Her body was ripely curved and firmly fleshed in the smart simple dark dress she wore. She was a lot of woman, a lot of danger.

They discussed the most recent holdups, and Rita told the Rangers that if the Stage Line lost one more coach Stoneham was going to close the line between El Paso and San Antonio. Already they were using ancient patched-up Concords and worn-out crowbait horses. This whole division was tottering on the brink of absolute ruin. She spoke of it with convincing sadness, but Hatfield was inclined to view her sorrow with skepticism.

WHO was it that this girl looked like? It seemed somehow vital to make the identification, yet grope as he might the answer eluded him.

After a while he said, "You mind if we go out the back way and look around a little?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Hatfield," said Rita Farrell. "The entire place is at your disposal, as you should know."

Outside, in the back yard, they were rounding the corner of a supply shed, when Fox Edley abruptly stiffened and pointed.

"There's them three monkeys, running for their horses!"

The Rangers started after them. The Mexicans twisted and fired back, without breaking stride, the flames licking out pale in the sunshine, the reports crashing and echoing among the outbuildings.

The close airlash of lead made the Rangers hit the dirt and roll to cover, their guns flaring from the ground, but the three Mexicans went on legging it for all they were worth. When Hatfield looked around the edge of his lumber pile, they were in the saddle and riding hard. He got up and raced after them, with Bouchard and Edley at his heels, all three of them throwing shots on the run. But the Mexicans reached the street, and were gone in a cloud of dust.

Passing a row of racked saddlers, Hatfield raked a carbine out of one saddleboot and carried it along with desperate driving strides, pulling ahead of the older and shorter-legged men.

The fleeing Mexicans had turned south toward the Rio Grande and Jaurez, of course. They were still in sight when Hatfield burst into mid-street, out of hand-gun range but within reach of the Henry rifle he had borrowed from someone's saddle. The street was empty behind the three riders. Hatfield took aim

and squeezed off a shot. The Mex in the middle flung himself forward on the neck of his horse, fell, and rolled loosely over and over in the billowing dust.

His horse hurtled on under the empty saddle, but the other two riders reined up and turned back for a moment. Hatfield hammered away at them with the Henry, as fast as he could jack fresh shells into the chamber, and the two who had turned back fled again under that rapid firing. Flogging and spurring their broncs, they swung into a side street and vanished toward the river. There was no chance of catching them now by men afoot.

Flanked by Bouchard and Edley, Jim Hatfield strode forward along the street, hoping the man he had downed was merely wounded and would be able to talk. But his aim had been too true. The .44-40 had drilled dead-center through the rider's back, shattering his breast-bone on the way out. The man was stone dead, silent forever.

Fox Edley searched the dusty body, but found nothing of interest except a metal disk, stamped with the letters, "C C C," above the figure, "58." Puzzling over it, Hatfield remarked that such tokens were sometimes used for payroll identification purposes, but what could the three C's stand for?

Then it came to him. "Chihuahua Coach Company," he said. "That doesn't tell us much, boys. But it does make it pretty plain that Asa Stoneham's got a traitor somewhere in his own home office force!"

They went back to the Butterfield building, leaving the dead Mex in the back lot for the time being, and ransacked the premises from top to bottom. They questioned every employee, both inside and outside of the office. And they learned nothing of significance.

Throughout the wearisome process, Rita Farrell watched them, and Hatfield in particular, with cool, superior amusement and scorn—as if they were stupid grown men, trying to play a children's game that baffled them completely.

After exhausting all possibilities in the divisional headquarters, Hatfield left Goldy with a hostler who knew exactly what to do for the big sorrel, and settled down with Bouchard and Edley to wait for Asa Stoneham. And even more worriedly for Milt Travers and Stebbins.

CHAPTER VI

Invasion

TWO days later the Rangers were still waiting for Stoneham, Travers, and old Stebbins, and still searching for the leak in the Butterfield Stage Office personnel.

After dinner they sat on the shady porch of the Border Hotel, cigars in teeth and boots on the rail, watching the lethargic flow of life in the sun-dazzled street. A little old man on a jaded coyote dun came plodding in from the south, rider and horse both looking exhausted and half-dead in the blazing heat. The man's clothes hung in filthy sweated ribbons, and the dun was brush-scarred under the dirty lather.

Horse and rider looked as if they had been popping brush a few jumps ahead of a posse for hundreds of miles.

Hatfield's boots dropped with a thud, as he straightened up in his chair, gray-green gaze narrowed on the oncoming rider. He recognized the *bayo coyote* from Elkhorn first, then identified the withered little rider. Stebbins, the horse trader!

At Hatfield's call, Stebbins turned in to the rail before the hotel and dropped wearily from saddle. With the reins flipped over the rack, he climbed the steps slowly and sank into the chair the tall Ranger had drawn up for him.

Stebbins called weakly for beer, and Fox Edley went in to the hotel barroom and brought back a trayful of glistening cold mugs. The first one emptied, Stebbins grabbed another as he began telling them what had happened in Mexico. It

wasn't quite as bad as Hatfield had expected, when he had seen the old-timer riding in alone.

Milt Travers, the horse trader said, was still alive down there in Damirez, or had been when Stebbins had left. The outlaws were holding him at the Chihuahua Coach Company, on the outskirts of town, and that's where all stolen Butterfield stages had been taken. The outlaw bunch down there had been using Milt pretty rough, but, nevertheless, for some reason they were keeping him alive—Stebbins hoped.

There was a thin chance of snaking Milt out of that rat trap, the old man declared, if they worked it right and had any kind of luck. The bandit chief, Juan Calderon, must have an army of at least a hundred owlhoots, but just now most of them had gone south with a bunch of the stage-coaches. To Chihuahua City, most likely. Wouldn't be back for about a week. The big fellows were still there in the walled-in wagon yard, though—Calderon and Estabol and *El Gavilan;* Russo and Martinez and Lobo Lash. If the Rangers could get in there, maybe they could gun down the ring-leaders and bust up the dirty rotten bunch.

The bandits, Stebbins went on to explain, had just put up a Gatling gun in a kind of bastion on one corner of the adobe wall. It covered the main gate, the whole front wall, but it could be turned to cover the area inside the walls, too. If the Rangers could get hold of that gun, they could control the whole layout. Especially now that the gang leaders were actually shorthanded.

"Can you raise a posse here, Jim?" asked Stebbins, draining another beer mug.

Hatfield shook his head. "Not to go down there, Steb. We couldn't even ask a posse to buck international law. We'll have to do it ourselves."

"Well, four of us is enough," Stebbins said. "We can travel without attracting attention, and move in on 'em without being spotted."

[*Turn page*]

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"You can't go back, Steb," protested Hatfield gently. "You're going to see a doctor and roll into bed for a good long rest."

Stebbins shook his grizzled head. "The hell I am, son! Milt Travers is my pardner, and I'm helping to get him out. I know the lay of the land down there, and you boys don't. Hellfire, you couldn't spin a thread without me! So don't give me no argument. All I need is a fresh horse and a bait of grub. And we'd better get going right away quick!"

Inside of half an hour they were moving out of El Paso, ranging along the river before crossing into Mexico, with Stebbins mounted on a fresh bronc. And there was plenty of ammunition, grub and water for all four of them.

HATFIELD had sent a long telegram to John Butterfield, to have him begin negotiations with the Mexican Government for the return of his stage-coaches. If the outlaw ring could be smashed, Butterfield would probably get the stages back in relatively short order. If not, an international situation might develop, and the Mex bandits would have time to wear the coaches out before a satisfactory settlement could be reached.

But the main thing was to rescue Milt Travers first, then break the renegades, if possible. And the rescuers couldn't wait for any diplomatic wheels to mesh and start grinding. A four-man invasion of Old Mexico was all they could count on. Just themselves and their guns.

They crossed the Rio Grande and lined out across foreign soil, with the bronze sandhills rising about them and rolling away toward the Sierra Madre in the southwest. Hatfield set a hard, steady pace, and old Stebbins somehow held up without a murmur, although he had long since been ridden out.

Bunchgrass was scattered on the wind-scoured plains of sand and stone, and *granjeno* thickets stood in gray ranks along the way. Vivid green *jarilla* grew around water holes, studded with spindling candlewood; and pepper trees made lacy patterns against the molten blue sky.

It was a broad and lonely land, but several times they ducked and ran to hide out from distant companies of horsemen. Every man a Texan met in this country was an enemy, whether a law-enforcing Rurale or a law-breaking thug, and the invaders didn't want any trouble this side of Damirez. There'd be more than enough of it when they hit that bandit stronghold.

They rode the sun out of the sky, and it was a relief when that ball of fire sank behind the faraway ranges. Darkness spread and deepened, and coolness flowed over the blistered earth. They unsaddled and ate a cold supper, waiting for moonrise. Then they saddled up and pushed on again toward their objective in the eerie shimmering light, broken by shadows of fantastic design.

On and on into the south, ever deeper into the terrain of the enemy, four riders invading a foreign nation, cut off from any hope of relief, reinforcement or support. Strictly isolated and on their own, four men with their lives dependent on their horses and guns, their own skill and strength and courage.

Four men against the Republic of Mexico, which would have resented their intrusion, no matter for what worthy cause, riding to save a fifth man, with the lives of all of them trembling in pinpoint balance.

"You know how to handle a Gatling gun, Jim?" asked Fox Edley, after they had ridden for a long time in silence.

Hatfield nodded. "I can shoot one, but can't guarantee to hit much with it."

"How's it work, Jim?" inquired Red Bouchard, wondering anew at the diversified knowledge and accomplishments of the Lone Wolf.

"Same principle as a revolver," Hatfield said. "There's a circular cluster of six barrels that revolve when you turn a crank, firing in turn. The mechanism loads, fires and ejects the shells, as the crank turns. Terrific firepower, particularly effective against close massed formations."

"English gun, ain't it?" Stebbins asked. "Or maybe German?"

"No, it was invented by an American, Steb," said Hatfield. "Richard Jordan Gatling, of North Carolina, in Eighteen-sixty-two."

Bouchard chuckled in his beard. "Tell us more, Professor."

"That's enough for one lesson, Hermit." Hatfield grinned. "I don't want to overtax that meager mind of yours."

They plodded on over the eroded moonlit surface of Old Mexico. . . .

IN THE first wan misted light of dawn, they stood on that strategic sandhill old Stebbins had described, and surveyed the adobe-walled camp of the enemy, slumbering in the foggy grayness.

The Gatling was mounted in a rude blockhouse at the near front corner, and the main gate was closed and barred. Diagonally across in the far corner stood the office building where Travers was being held prisoner, and where the outlaw leaders had their sleeping quarters.

The barracks of the rank-and-file owlhoots stretched along the far wall, adjacent to the headquarters adobe. Barns, sheds and workshops were backed against the other walls, with a row of stage-coaches before them. The corrals were crammed with horses, and it was a safe bet that most of them wore the Butterfield iron.

A plan formulated quickly in Jim Hatfield's brain as he studied the scene. One or two sentries drowsed in the box with the Gatling. The wall could be surmounted by men standing in their saddles. Two on the Gatling guns—Bouchard and himself. Two climbing over in back of the office to free Milt—old Stebbins and Fox Edley. The best the big Ranger could do with what they had available.

There were maybe twenty-five or thirty Mexicans in there, Stebbins estimated, with perhaps half of them first-class fighting men, the others peon laborers. But the Americans would have total surprise, and then the Gatling on their side. The bandits would never expect to be attacked here in the heart of their own country, and in their own stronghold.

It was essential to move in and strike before sunup and full daylight, so Hatfield outlined his plan of action. The four men mounted and rode down the off-hillside to swing toward that wall of mud bricks. Edley and Stebbins circled the enclosure, while Hatfield and Bouchard angled in close to the barrier.

Waiting until the other two men had time to reach the far corner, Hatfield and Bouchard pulled their mounts against the wall near that corner bastion. Standing upright in the leather, they hauled themselves carefully to the top of the wall, Colts in right hands.

Two sentinels were in the box, both asleep at their post. The two Rangers crawled toward them cautiously. Hatfield, sweating in the coolness, could feel his heart beat against the adobe as he snaked forward on his belly.

With infinite care, he rose into a crouch beside the low wall of the blockhouse, with Bouchard coming up at his haunches. The nearest sentry stirred in his sleep as he sat propped up inside the box. Hatfield struck hard with his gun-barrel, and the man toppled sideward, steeple sombrero crushed flat on his skull.

The other guard woke up screaming, and rolled frantically away from Bouchard's slashing barrel. Flat on his back the Mex fired one shot, the slug whining between Bouchard and Hatfield, then Ranger bullets smashed him lifeless against the bastion floor.

Stepping over the low barrier into the open-sided bastion, they flung the two bodies out of the way and swung the Gatling gun around to cover the interior of the yard. Lights flickered and shouts sounded from the barracks across the way, as Hatfield explored the mechanism of the large weapon.

Bouchard holstered his Colt and picked up one of the sentry's carbines, levering a shell into the chamber. The office adobe in the opposite corner of the great rectangle was still dark and silent. Hatfield prayed that Fox and Stebbins would get

Travers out before the outlaw chieftains awoke.

Doors slammed open and dark forms spewed out of the long barracks into the compound just as Hatfield, with the final adjustments made, lined the cumbersome six-barreled gun and began winding the crank that fed, fired, and ejected the cartridges.

The rapid blasting ripped the morning stillness. Flames jetted and roared, smoke darkened the mist, and brass shells flew aside in a glittering arc. The Gatling lurched and leaped with the swift explosions, as Hatfield went on cranking, and Bouchard opened fire with the rifle.

MEXICAN bandits went down howling and rolling in the dirt before the barracks, streams of bullets slashing the ragged ranks apart and mowing men under. The survivors fled wildly back into the building, and rifle shots began spurting from the windows. Lead snarled around Hatfield and Bouchard in their lofty exposed perch, screeching off adobe and spraying them with dust and splinters. Deafened and powder-blackened behind the belching gun, Hatfield swung his multiple barrels to rake the front of the bunkhouse. Bouchard emptied the first carbine, and went to work with the second. Eight of the bandit bunch lay in the yard, some motionless, others writhing and crawling feebly in the gravel.

There were lights and commotion in the office structure now, and occasional muzzle lights flickered from the windows, but none of the bandit leaders came out the front way. Gunfire burst out at the rear of the barracks, rising to a furious crescendo, then thinning out. Evidently Stebbins and Edley had caught some *caballeros* sneaking out the back way, and had cut them down or driven them back inside. Hatfield hoped Travers was with his two men by this time.

Not wanting to overheat and jam the Gatling, Hatfield ceased firing. There was nothing to shoot at except those deep narrow windows across from him, and Bouchard's carbines were better adapted to that kind of sniping than the big gun.

There was sudden activity behind the headquarters adobe, with dust swirling up over the roof and a few gunshots echoing off the walls. But there was nothing to be seen, nothing on which to target. The outlaw chiefs could be saddling up to break and run for it. For all they knew, there could be an entire company of Rangers or other determined American reserves out here.

Red Bouchard had reloaded both Mex rifles, and was pumping shots into the barracks windows with methodical precision, commending and criticizing his own marksmanship as he went along. Hatfield unleashed the Gatling again, lashing the façade of that bunkhouse, but there was scarcely any return fire.

And all of a sudden it was plain that the rank-and-file of the bandits had taken about all they cared to take. A white rag tied to a rifle barrel fluttered from one aperture, and Hatfield and Bouchard stopped shooting. These two Rangers commanded the quadrangle, but where were their comrades? It would be a hollow victory unless Milt Travers was freed, and Edley and Stebbins returned unhurt. And where were the leaders of this outfit?

The sun was rimming the eastern horizon now, raying red-gold light high into the heavens, and stillness had returned to the earth. Hatfield spat repeatedly, but the rank taste of gunpowder remained in his mouth and throat. Bouchard bit off a fresh chew of tobacco, and munched on it with relish and satisfaction.

A call from outside the wall brought them both to the edge, and Hatfield's heart soared thankfully as he saw three riders below and recognized the long, limber form of Milt Travers as one of them. Old Steb and the Fox had done it! They had sprung Milt loose, and even got him a horse to ride somehow.

"The big ones got away, Jim—about a dozen of 'em," Fox Edley called, as they neared. "They had a gate hidden in the back wall there, opening out of the corral where they kept their saddle broncs. We

found it after they'd breezed out. That's how we got a horse and saddle for Milt."

Milt Travers looked bruised, battered and ragged, but he seemed to be all right.

"Come on down and let's get to riding!" he called. "I been in this country long enough to last a lifetime." His laugh was still clear, gay and boyish, and Hatfield knew with gratitude that no permanent damage had been done to Milt Travers's body, mind, or spirit.

termined to find out where the renegades were going.

Milt Travers said he hadn't been able to learn much during his captivity. "They've got somebody at Elkhorn Station, and someone in Stoneham's office at El Paso," he drawled. "But I don't know who they are."

"We'll find out, Milt—and soon now," Hatfield promised. "The real leader of the outfit must be in Texas. These Mexi-

A TALL TEXAS TALE

OLD AS THE HILLS

IN WESTERN Texas where I made my home, folks had a habit of living quite a spell. We never thought a man had good sense until he reached a hundred, and this was bore out by the fact that few men ever married after they reached that age.

Now the Easterners down around Dallas died off young and it warn't unusual for a feller to kick off at eighty.

One day one of them Easterners was riding along in our territory when he seen Mike Flannery, who was eighty-two four days after St. Patrick's Day, setting on the side of the road crying like all git out.

The stranger stopped and said: "What are you crying about?"

"My pa just give me a whopping," sobbed Mike.

"That's awful," said the stranger. "What did he whip you for?"

Mike wiped his eyes with his sleeve, sniffed a couple of times and sobbed: "For sassing my Grampa."

—W. L. Hudson

Hanging by their hands and dropping down the outside wall, Hatfield and Bouchard caught their horses and climbed into saddle, and the little cavalcade headed back into the north. Five horsemen now, where there had been but four. And Hatfield knew he'd never ride in any better company.

THEY cut the trail of the fleeing outlaw leaders, the nucleus of the band, and were surprised to find those tracks northward. The Rangers stayed on that trace, for although they were too spent to try to overtake Calderon's crew, they were decans now riding ahead of us probably figure their game is busted wide open down here, and they want to report to the big chief and salvage what they can."

They came to a place where the bandit tracks had divided that forenoon. Three riders had borne off to the northeast, the other nine had continued due north. After a short confab, Hatfield took up the trace of the trio, leaving his comrades to follow the larger force. He had an idea his three were pointing for Elkhorn, and if he could catch them there he believed he could uncover the secret of the whole bandit organization.

CHAPTER VIII

"Die, Tejanos, Die!"

MILT TRAVERS, exulting in the motion of his horse, the burn of the sun, and the whip of the breeze on his face, was thinking it was wonderful to be alive and free, to be riding with men like Bouchard, Edley, and Stebbins, on his way home to Texas.

The Mexican outlaws had cuffed, kicked and quirted him around some, but they had fed him well and had not treated him too badly, in general. They wanted him in good shape for his planned execution by torture, which had been scheduled to take place when the bulk of Calderon's brigands returned from Chihuahua City. His captors, however, had delighted in describing to Travers what was in store for him. They had prophesied that he would beg for death long before it came, and Travers hadn't doubted that for a minute. He knew that such outlaws as these had long ago lost any spark of manhood or human feeling they might ever have possessed.

Now he was free and with two fellow Rangers and his partner, old Stebbins, and was riding through a steep-sided canyon on the tracks of the main party of bandit chieftains. Riding at the rear of the little column, in the furnace heat of mid-afternoon, he glanced at the backtrail now and then.

There was a Henry rifle in the saddle-boot on the outlaw horse he had appropriated, and he had found two belted guns in a shed off that corral in back of the office building. Travers missed his own horse and weapons, but he wasn't going to complain, after such a miraculous escape. He was mounted and armed, with friends, and homeward bound. That was enough—far more than he had dared hope for.

Riding at the point, Red Bouchard reined up and raised his hand, staring down at horse droppings that were fresher than they should be. That could only mean that the riders ahead had been slowing down, holding back, perhaps preparing an ambush. This sheer-walled canyon was a likely spot for that.

Eyes probed the terrain ahead, seeing only brush and boulders on a sandy floor between high, jagged stone walls. Travers scanned the backtrail, and this time caught faint dark flickers of movement in the distance. They were in a trap! He knew it instantly, with every sharpened instinct. Some of the Mexican bandits were waiting ahead, while others were closing up from behind.

"They're coming up in back, men," Travers said quietly, even as he was recalling a long, deep pothole he had passed recently, one fringed with thorny bushes and jumbled rocks. "I know a place where we can hole up. Follow me back."

And as the words left his lips lead scoured the canyon as rifles opened up in front of them, from shelter along both flanks of the defile. With a wild snarl of fury and hatred, Stebbins threw his mount forward into that rifle fire, charging single-handed toward certain death with his Colt flaring and jumping in his right hand.

"Come back, Steb!" yelled Travers, with Bouchard and Edley echoing his appeal, but the little old-timer went bucketing on like a madman. Straight down the middle.

His suicidal action no doubt saved the lives of his companions, for they'd been caught in the open. Fanning into cover now, the three Rangers gave Stebbins all the supporting fire they could muster, laying it on with their carbines as fast as they could work triggers and levers. Stebbins had emptied his hand-gun when his horse dropped beneath him in a welter of dust. They thought he was finished, but he rolled clear with his Spencer, and began slamming away with that.

With bullets beating all around him, powdering rocks and churning up soil, Stebbins went on aiming and firing with cold, incredible calmness. He dropped one Mexican over a stone slab, and blew

another off a shelf on the canyon wall.

Then the crossfire struck him, twisting, jerking, tearing him backward and down in a patch of *agrito*. Even then Stebbins tried to get up, but another slug smashed him flat and dead in the dusty weeds.

CHOKING and cursing, the Rangers fled now for Travers's pothole, driving into it just before the Mexicans in the rear opened fire. The hole was deep enough to conceal the horses, and the rocks and *tazcal* bushes afforded fine cover from which to shoot. They could hold out here almost indefinitely, unless the enemy managed to get up on the rims. And to do that they would have to make a long, round-about climb, because the inner walls were plainly inaccessible.

They picked positions at either side of the ditch, Travers taking the backtrail, the other pair in front, and waited grimly for targets. Travers saw the outlaws advancing through a grove of walnut trees, and turned the sixteen-shot Henry loose, driving them back and pinning them down, as he fired with vicious fury and speed.

Bouchard and Edley saw movements in the scrub oak and *cardenche* along the base of the walls, and they poured their wicked fire onto both wings, checking and turning back the Mexicans. There was a lull then, the bandits licking their wounds while they realized that the charge of old Stebbins had robbed them of their advantage. It was a long-scale proposition now, with the Rangers firmly intrenched. It would take some doing to smoke the Texans out of that pothole, and the bandits would have to pay dearly before that was done.

"What the hell got into old Steb?" mumbled Red Bouchard, wagging his head sorrowfully.

"I dunno, but he sure saved our hides for us," Fox Edley said soberly.

"Old Steb got mad, I reckon," drawled Milt Travers. "He was old and tired, and he got sick of it. He'd taken a lot, and he didn't want to stand any more. He was filled up to the lid with those bandits, full of fire and hate for them. So he cut loose the whole works, charged right into those gun-muzzles, and went out blazing bright and beautiful—like a shooting star, boys."

"A lot of man, that little hombre," murmured Bouchard.

"He sure was," Edley said. "Salty as they come, a real old Texas man. All heart and guts, hellfire and lightning."

"Here they come again," Milt Travers remarked conversationally. "If we can knock down a few of 'em—like old Steb did—maybe they'll get a bellyful and pull their freight."

The Mexicans came from both ends of the canyon with reckless daring this time, firing as they ran forward through the brush and boulders, screaming, "Die, *Tejanos*, die!" Travers knew with a sinking sensation that they had picked up some reinforcements. Since Stebbins had taken two with him there should have been only seven of them, but there were twice that many, or more. At least eight in each bunch, Travers estimated.

"I winged that buzzard," Fox Edley said. "He won't drink tequila with that flipper for quite a spell."

"I got one right under the belt buckle," Red Bouchard said, spitting with satisfaction. "That peon won't bother us no more."

And Milt Travers knew that he had cut one of them down, flopping like a headless chicken. But still they came on, shooting and yowling like maniacs. The canyon was a blazing, roaring inferno now. Ricochets screeched into the pothole, tugging at the Rangers' clothing and scorching their skin. Dirt and stone chips pelted them in hot showers. Rifle-barrels grew heated, and trigger fingers ached numbly.

When the Rangers had to reload their carbines, the Mexicans drove in even closer, flitting through the rocks and *sacahuiste* clumps. For one horrible instant it looked as if they were going to overrun that smoking hole in the ground, but Travers and Bouchard and Edley whipped out their sixguns and lashed

them back from the ditch. Then, the two Winchesters and the Henry ready once more, the Texans kept driving them backward into distant shelter.

But the Mexican outlaws tried it again, rushing and yelling, "Die, *Tejanos,* die!" and the three sweating, swearing men from Texas had to do it all over again, firing as fast as they could jack the shells in. There were enemy casualties this trip, wounded men screaming in the brush, and others huddled in final stillness.

"Got to hold out till dark," muttered Fox Edley, sucking water from his canteen.

RED BOUCHARD snorted and touched a bullet-burn on his neck. "If we can't do that, we don't deserve to see Texas again."

"Maybe they won't hang around all afternoon," Milt Travers said, wiping sweat and dirt off his lean face. "They must be getting sick of this, too."

"They can pull out anytime," Edley drawled. "I seen enough of their stripe for one outing."

"Haven't seen any of the big boys," said Travers.

Bouchard grunted and spat. "Probably standing way back with whips driving the rest of 'em into the gunsmoke."

The afternoon dragged on, the heat intense and merciless, until the shadow of the western wall fell across the pothole. The Mexicans were still out there, but less aggressive now. Maybe they were waiting for still more reinforcements from somewhere.

Milt Travers thought somberly, well, if they get enough of them, we'll likely stay right here in this canyon with old Stebbins. But it would be good company to die in, anyway, if we *have* to die in this damned hole, and we'll pull plenty of them down with us before it's over.

"Lemme borrow a chew of that tobacco, Red," drawled Travers. "Can't bother making a smoke here."

Bouchard handed over the plug. "If I had all the tobacco you Rangers have chawed off me, I'd never have to buy no more of the stuff."

"Maybe Santa Claus'll bring you some, come Christmas," said Travers.

Fox Edley spat disgustedly. "They're moving in again, boys. This is beginning to get kinda tiresome, ain't it?"

CHAPTER IX

Three for El Paso

BY THE middle of the afternoon, Jim Hatfield had closed up enough to get a look at the three men he was trailing. Uncasing his field-glasses on a juniper bench behind them, he brought them into clear focus in the lenses. From the descriptions furnished by Stebbins and Travers, he was able to make tentative identifications.

The trim dapper one with the elegant manner might be *El Gavilan,* the Hawk, one of the deadliest of Mexican gunfighters. The large bulky man undoubtedly was Russo. And the thick-set husky with the thrusting snakelike head should be Lobo Lash, if Hatfield's memory served him correctly. Three bad ones, and almost certainly bound for Elkhorn Station.

The Lone Wolf went on dogging their tracks at a discreet distance. It was a marvelous feeling to cross the Rio Grande and travel on Texas soil again. The course was northeast, and then almost due east, with the sun lowering at Hatfield's back and shadows lengthening on the plains.

Their destination was Elkhorn all right, and he began wondering how he was going to move into the depot and take them. They had a confederate there who was unknown to Hatfield, and that made it all the more risky. He could get the drop on the three bandits, only to have their undercover man put a bullet in his back.

It must be Vince Barlee, he thought. Maybe Barlee and Celinda Moore were both in on it. Hatfield might have been wrong about her. He'd been wrong often

enough about other women, here and there.

With the sun gone, darkness gathered, and then came pitch-black night. Hatfield stopped and loosened the cinches on Goldy, and ate a cold snack from his saddlebags. He took the saddle off to let the sorrel roll in the grass, while he himself smoked a cigar and waited for the moon.

When moonlight finally gilded the sky and silvered the earth, Hatfield cinched up his double-rigging, stepped aboard and rode onward.

It was nearly time for the westbound stage-coach from Pueblo Springs, when the lights of Elkhorn Station twinkled into view. Providing that stage was still running. He bypassed the depot in a wide arc, and slanted back toward the highway. He'd have more chance of getting to the station on the coach than he would on horseback. No one would be looking for him among the passengers from the east. Leaving Goldy out in the brush, Hatfield walked to the road and waited there.

In a few minutes he heard the drumming hooves of the six-horse hitch, and the accompanying clatter and creak of the Concord. It sounded light—maybe was empty, and he shouldn't wonder if it was, after all those holdups and killings. Holding up both arms, Hatfield stepped out to flag down the vehicle, hoping the guard wasn't edgy enough to blast him with that shotgun at sight.

The driver pulled up, cursing, and the Greener was trained on Hatfield, but it did not burst aflame. As Hatfield had thought not a single passenger was on the coach. He showed his Ranger star and explained the situation.

"Tell them you had no passengers," he concluded. "I'll get down on the floor under a blanket."

"Sure," said the driver. "You want any help with them Mexes, when we get in there? We'll maybe go on through tonight."

"I don't think so," Hatfield said. "But if you'll hang around until I take them, you'll have three important passengers for El Paso. All wrapped up in ropes—or maybe blankets."

"Pleasure." The driver grinned. "Only we'd rather carry them kind dead than alive."

"Perhaps I can oblige you," Hatfield said gravely, and climbed into the empty Concord.

When they pulled into the back ward at Elkhorn, he was flat on the floor beneath a blanket, a Colt ready in his right hand. He heard the Butterfield men talking to Celinda Moore and Vince Barlee, while the hostlers unharnessed the team and carried express bundles and crates inside the depot.

AFTER everyone had gone and the yard was silent, Hatfield got up cautiously and peered over the door of the coach. He could see the whole length of the main room through the windows. The three outlaws were at the bar, and Barlee was serving and talking to them.

Celinda was not in sight,—probably out

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in the kitchen or upstairs. If Hatfield had been certain he could trust her, he would have liked to talk with her before he acted, but he didn't feel at all sure of Celinda. He didn't feel too sure of anybody in this case, outside of his Rangers, Asa Stoneham and old Stebbins.

Slipping out of the stage, Hatfield went quietly into the station through the rear door and up the back stairway. In the second-floor corridor, a door opened and his gun jumped level in his hand. It was Celinda, hazel eyes wide with shocked surprise, lips parted as if to cry out.

Hatfield motioned for silence. She nodded her bright chestnut head, and relief and pleasure replaced her startled expression. She drew him into the room back of her—her own bedroom—and locked the door.

And when she turned into the lamplight, Hatfield was startled and shocked himself. For in that moment he knew why the face of Rita Farrel, Stoneham's secretary in El Paso, had seemed so familiar to him.

It was because of Rita's striking resemblance to Celinda Moore!

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked in surprise, seeing the strange look on his rugged bronzed features.

"You know Rita Farrell at headquarters?" he asked.

"Why, yes. She's my sister. My name was Farrell before I married. Why?"

"Never mind now," he said hurriedly. "You know those three Mexicans downstairs?"

"No, but Vince seems to," Celinda said. "And I don't like that any better than I like their looks. Who are they, Mr. Jimson—Oh, I'd rather say Jim."

"They're three of the bandits who've been raiding the Butterfield Line," he told her grimly.

"Oh, *no!*" she gasped softly. "Oh, Jim—I hate to believe it! But Vince must be mixed up with them somehow. I—I overheard them talking. Not much, but enough to tell me—" Her voice broke off dismally, and she shook her head with violence.

"What is Vince Barlee to you, Celinda?" inquired Hatfield flatly.

"Nothing, really. He and my sister were engaged to be married, but Vince got into some kind of a scrape and they had to postpone it. Rita asked me to give him a job out here, so I did. I've never thought Vince was *bad*, Jim. I've known he was lazy, weak and easy-going, but—oh, not an outlaw!"

"Well, he is," Hatfield said. "And I'm afraid your sister is mixed up in it, too."

Celinda met his gray-green eyes squarely, then inclined her head. "I'm afraid it's all too possible, Jim. She's always seen things different from the way I do. We haven't been close for years. She—she *wants* too much, Jim. There's a hunger, a greed in her that always frightened me."

"What are they planning downstairs?"

"I don't know. They've been drinking a lot since they arrived. And talking about getting smashed, busted wide open, down in Damirez. I think they're worried, and I know Vince is scared to death by what they've told him."

"I'm a lawman, Mrs. Moore, and I've got to take those three. And Vince, too, some time. Can you keep him off my back while I'm handling the Mexes?"

Celinda nodded. "I think so. I'll try."

"Fine," said Hatfield. "And get the Mexicans drunker, if possible. It will shave the odds down some, if they're loaded with liquor."

"I'll get them loaded for you, Jim Jimson," promised Celinda. "They've been begging me to drink with them ever since they got here."

Hatfield smiled at her gently. "Good girl. I'll be down after the party gets warmed up a little."

HALF AN HOUR later, Jim Hatfield could wait no longer. He went down the back stairs and out the back door, to peep into the main room of the depot. Celinda Moore was behind the bar, chatting and laughing with *El Gavilan* and Russo, who sprawled there with mouth agape.

Neither Vince Barlee nor the two stagecoach men were around. But when Hat-

field went inside again, through the kitchen, he saw the driver and guard at a table in the dining room. Nodding and smiling at them, he went on toward the big front room, a towering graceful figure.

Stepping through the arch, he moved up to the bar in back of the hulking Russo, who disregarded his presence. But *El Gavilan* drew back a trifle, to peer around Russo's bulk at the tall intruder.

Hatfield drew, shielded by Russo's corpulent body, and chopped the barrel across the man's skull with savage force. Russo started to fold and crumble, but Hatfield caught him with his left hand knotted in the slack of the loose jacket, holding that massive weight upright. *El Gavilan's* hand flashed in a blur of speed, wickedly fast for all of the drinking he had done. His gun blazed, but Hatfield already had swung Russo around and heaved him forward into that muzzle blast.

Breaking in the middle, Russo's huge frame toppled against *El Gavilan,* jarring the Hawk backward and bearing his gun-hand down. With a snarl the slim Mexican wrenched clear, letting Russo crash ponderously to the floor. And it was then that Jim Hatfield's Colt leveled off, flaming.

The slug ripped into *El Gavilan's* chest and rammed him back into a jerk-legged stagger. He was still striving to bring his gun up when Hatfield's second shot smashed him flat on the floorboards. The Hawk twitched, kicked, then lay still on his back, teeth bared, and blank stare fixed on the smoky ceiling.

Another gun roared from the doorway behind Hatfield, and he wondered how the marksman could have missed his back, as he spun around to line his Colt in that direction. Barely in time Hatfield held his fire. It was Vince Barlee who had fired, but he hadn't aimed at the Ranger, wasn't even looking at Hatfield now.

Barlee's gaze was on the couch, and as Hatfield swung around he saw Lobo Lash sinking slowly back against the wall, eyes dilated with shock, blood gushing from his throat, and pistol slithering out of his slackened grasp onto the couch at his side. Lobo Lash had come out of his drunken stupor to take a shot at Hatfield, but Vince Barlee had broken through the front door and beaten the half-breed to it! Lash made an awful gurgling sound, and his reptilian head lolled loosely on his crimsoned chest.

As quick as that there were three dead bandits in Elkhorn Station.

Celinda Moore had sunk into a chair behind the bar, her burnished chestnut head pillowed in her shaking hands. The two Butterfield men were looking on from the dining room archway.

Hatfield smiled somberly at Barlee, thinking; *He knows the Chihuahua Coach Company is busted, and he probably knows I'm a Ranger. He decided to switch sides, get on the winning team, put himself in solid with the law. A little too late, boy, even if you did save my life.*

Aloud he said, "I wasn't figuring on Lash. Kind of careless of me. Reckon I owe you a vote of thanks, Vince."

"You don't owe me a thing, Jimson," said Barlee. "But I'm sure glad I saw him setting up and reaching—in time. He almost had a bead on you." Barlee shook his curly head. "Matter of seconds. Too damn close."

"You know these Mexicans, Vince?"

"No, only just to see 'em around. Had a hunch they was bad ones, though."

HATFIELD said, "Worse than that. Well, thanks anyway, Vince. That was good quick work, boy." He turned to the stage-coach men. "You want to drive on tonight? There's three passengers that won't give you a bit of trouble. Three for El Paso, wrapped in blankets, just the way you wanted 'em."

"Sure, we'll pack them dead coyotes outa here for you, feller," said the driver. "We ain't got no passenger schedule to worry about no more. People don't dare to ride this line, and I don't blame 'em a damn bit."

"They'll be riding it again before long—more than ever," Hatfield told them. "Deliver these corpses to Asa Stoneham. He's apt to pay you a bonus for hauling them

in. I'll send a note along, too."

Jim Hatfield turned to the bar, poured himself a long drink, and drank it down like water. Then, with another glassful in his hand he crouched down to soothe Celinda Moore as best he could. . . .

An hour later, Hatfield was out on a borrowed Elkhorn bronc to find Goldy. He wondered what to do about Vince Barlee, how to handle him. It wasn't pleasant to have to arrest a man who had just saved your life, but that didn't make Barlee any the less guilty of banditry.

Hatfield had crossed open prairie toward the brush and boulder fields where he had left the sorrel when a bullet screee-ed past his ear, and the *spang* of a high-powered rifle sounded from a cedar ridge far behind him. As Hatfield twisted for a look, lead sang again and another report crashed and echoed through the night.

In the moonlight he recognized the light buckskin horse that was Vince Barlee's mount. Now what had changed Vince's mind all of a sudden? Had some more outlaws arrived, causing the man to switch sides again, for that his attacker was Vince Barlee there could be no doubt. Or maybe he had decided that Hatfield meant to take him anyway, in spite of what he had done, and meant to take no chances.

The rifleman was out of hand-gun range. Hatfield's Winchester was on Goldy, and there was no saddle-gun on this horse. Nothing to do but run for it, run and hope. He threw the pony forward, and made himself small in the saddle. Vince Barlee, he thought, realizing that saving Hatfield's life wasn't going to save his own neck, had followed Jim out here to take the life he had so recently preserved. It must be Barlee! And he'd kill Celinda, too, if necessary to save his own hide!

The bronc was at full gallop when the bullet struck him. Hatfield felt the animal shudder under the impact and start to break and fall. Kicking clear of the stirrups Hatfield was catapulted over the horses head, landing loose and rolling, as the bronc cartwheeled, screaming, in torrents of moonlit dust and dirt. Something smashed Hatfield's head, as he slid along the ground. It felt as if his skull shattered into one great white flash of light that faded abruptly into endless, dark oblivion.

CHAPTER X

When Thieves Fall Out

WHEN Jim Hatfield awoke it was daylight, burning hot, and the position of the sun told that it was afternoon. Pain dinned in his head, and nausea shook his body. He tried to get up, but there was no strength in him.

Fortunately he had tumbled into the scant shade of scrub oak and juniper, which gave some protection from the glaring sun. His skull was splitting, and stomach-retching sickness racked him. He was dying for water, his throat and tongue parched and swollen like charred leather.

The dead horse lay nearby, bloating in the heat. Two evil, raw-necked vultures were at work on the carcass, casting speculative looks at the man from time to time. Anger flared in Hatfield, and his right hand groped for the holstered gun on that side.

It was an effort to draw, cock and aim the Colt. The explosion almost blew the weapon out of his grip, but one buzzard died in a frenzy of flailing wings and torn feathers. The other flapped away from the carrion feast. Hatfield fired again and missed, and slumped back to earth in sick exhaustion.

Then he realized the folly of it. Those shots might bring Vince Barlee or some other enemy down on him, and Hatfield was too weak and ill now to put up much of a fight. He tried to whistle to Goldy, but his lips and tongue were too dry and crusted. Gagging and groaning in helpless fevered torment, Jim Hatfield passed out again.

The afternoon was waning when he came to once more, and Goldy was standing over him. Nothing had ever looked so good as that sorrel, and there was water in the canteen if he could reach it. After several puny, blundering efforts, Hatfield got to his knees and clutched a stirrup to hoist himself erect. The exertion nearly burst his skull, and left him limp and sweat-soaked, hanging to the saddle.

Tepid water from the canteen restored him somewhat, but when he tried to climb into the saddle the strain was too much. He fell back on the ground in utter collapse, and again his senses fled in a dark, drowning rush.

Dusk had come with lavender and purple shadows when he once more came to life. He was stronger and more clear-headed now. Hauling himself up by the stirrup straps, he unstoppered the canteen and gulped more of the precious life-saving water. After an interval he was able to stand alone and walk about a bit, exercising his legs and arms. The pain in his head was still severe, but his strength was slowly returning. He felt less feverish and addled. He was going to live after all, he guessed, and now there was no question about what to do with Vince Barlee.

Hatfield found the stirrup and rose stiffly into the leather, remembering then to punch out the two empties and place live shells in the cylinder of his right-hand Colt. The other gun was secure in its sheath, and the Winchester in the scabbard.

As darkness thickened, he rode a circuitous route toward Elkhorn Station, coming in through the pasture behind the barn and sheds. At a stone trough he got down to bathe his head and wash his face and hands. The water refreshed him immensely, and he rode on feeling much stronger and better, that hideous drum in his head reduced now to a steady, nagging pulse of pain.

He wanted Vince Barlee now. He wanted that man beaten down to his knees, or dead.

The barn was darkened and no one was there, but lights showed from the bunkhouse. Through the rear windows of the depot, he saw a crowd at the bar and wondered if some outlaws had arrived at Elkhorn.

Leaving Goldy in the shadows, he crossed the yard for a closer look. The bandits had arrived in force, all right. Six of them, at least. Quite a handful for one beat-up Ranger.

Celinda Moore was tending bar, her features drawn and gaunt, and three gun-hung Mexicans in braided charro jackets and breeches, were drinking there. Across the room behind them, Vince Barlee was crouched at the edge of the couch on which Lobo Lash had died last night, his face drained and distorted with terror. In front of him stood three other desperadoes whom Hatfield thought he recognized from the descriptions Stebbins and Travers had given him.

THE commander-in-chief of them, broad and solid, and with the bold arrogance of an eagle about him, was certainly Juan Calderon, and at the moment he was fairly blazing with fury. The man with the patrician profile and superior bored manner would be Estabol. The third man, darkly intense and with the ferver of a fanatic was probably Martinez.

The big three of the Chihuahua Coach Company! And they were vastly displeased with Vince Barlee. From all appearances, Hatfield wouldn't have to kill the man who had saved him from Lash's gun. The outlaw chieftains were going to take care of that matter, it seemed.

Hatfield crept around to the side of the building, and paused outside the partly opened window behind the couch to listen. The first words he heard were those of Calderon, storming: "You say they are dead, all three of them? And one Texas Ranger did that? You lie, gringo! You helped him kill them. You turned on them when you heard of the disaster at Damirez. Three of my finest men! You'll die by inches, Señor Traitor! I'll have your arms and legs broken, your fingers and toes disjointed, your ears, nose and

tongue cut off! And you'll be alive to watch them disembowel you, Barlee!"

"No, no!" cried Barlee. "You're wrong, you're crazy! That big Ranger—I found out he's Jim Hatfield—he killed them, but I killed him! I can show you his body, Juan."

"Where is it?"

"Out on the plains. I can take you to it, Juan."

"If you killed him, you did it too late," Juan Calderon said. "Too late for *El Gavilan* and Russo and Lobo Lash. But if you can prove what you say, Barlee, we'll have to believe you, I suppose. If you can produce the dead body of this Ranger Hatfield."

"I can! I'll take you there. It's only a few miles." Vince Barlee was almost blubbering in relief and eagerness.

Jim Hatfield heard hoofbeats in the road, whirled away from the window and went back across the yard to mount the sorrel, pulling out behind the bunkhouse and sheds. Three or four horsemen, it sounded like. His Rangers, perhaps? Or more Mex bandits? He had to make sure. If they *were* Rangers, he couldn't let them ride into this nest of killer bandits. If they were outlaws, maybe he could cut them down before they reached the station.

Angling toward the highway, Hatfield smiled grimly as he thought of Vince Barlee's shocked dismay at not finding his body out there on the prairie. Well, it might be a break for Vince, at that. Calderon probably would be crazy-mad enough to shoot Barlee out of the saddle, and Vince would be spared that lingering death by torture.

From a stand of cottonwoods, Hatfield watched three riders approach on the moonlit road, his heart lifting as he made out the familiar figures of Milt Travers and Fox Edley and Red Bouchard. But old Stebbins was not with them. He hoped Steb hadn't stopped a slug with his name on it, down there in the wastelands of old Mexico.

Hatfield called out to identify himself, and the three riders turned into the shadowy grove to join him. By the light of the moonbeams filtering through the leafy boughs, he could read the record of the ordeal they had suffered in their strained, hollow-eyed faces. They told him about it, and about the death of old Stebbins, and then about how they had come to escape.

The Mexicans, Travers related, had withdrawn in the darkness, apparently moving out under orders from higher up. The Rangers had recovered and buried the body of old Stebbins, and set out on the trace of the bandits, which had brought them here to Elkhorn Station. They hadn't tracked the outlaws all the way, having given that up in the darkness once they found the direction of the outlaw march bore directly toward this place.

"That's probably the bunch in the depot now," Hatfield said.

QUICKLY he brought them up to date on events and the present situation at Elkhorn Station.

"I don't know, Jim," said Travers with a shake of his head when the tall Ranger had finished. "I kind of doubt that's the same gang that hit us, then took off this way. Should be pretty close to twice the number you say are here now, according to the way we got it figured, and we sure didn't recognize any of the top boys, like Calderon and Estabol, in the scrap we had with 'em. We might have by-passed the ones we were following when we hit straight for the Station, and the ones we fought could still be due to join the big boys here most any time."

"You're likely right, Milt," Hatfield replied quietly, "though I hope not. That'd stack the odds mighty high against us."

In any case, they decided to wait until the bandits rode in search of Hatfield's body, then they would move in, take over the depot, and set up an ambush for the killers on their return.

"Jim," Milt Travers said then, "there was one dying outlaw back in that canyon who did some crazy ranting and raving before he cashed in. It didn't make much sense, but I reckon you'd ought to hear

it. He said, 'Your big boss, my big boss, all the same man. Your *caporal*, my *caporal* too. He run both sides at the same time. Butterfield Stage Line, Chihuahua Coach Company, he boss of both.'"

"He must have been out of his head, Milt," said Hatfield. "Asa Stoneham *is* the Butterfield Line in Texas. It's always been his whole life. He called us in on this case, and he's been working with us as much as possible. The Squire's been betrayed and victimized by that secretary of his. Rita Farrell and Vince Barlee are the Chihuahua agents on this side of the Border."

"Stoneham always struck me as a right four-square gent," Fox Edley said thoughtfully. "But a feller told me once that Asa wanted to marry a niece or cousin or something of Butterfield's, and old John wouldn't have it, for some reason. Then they say Stoneham wanted that job of general manager for the whole road, and John Butterfield named another man instead. I don't know anything about it, Jim. Just telling what I've heard."

"I've heard similar rumors, Fox," admitted Hatfield. "But they never changed my opinion of Asa Stoneham. It's Rita Farrell and Barlee—especially the woman—who have put the Squire in wrong and made him look bad. Butterfield might even fire Asa for this. Maybe he has already."

From a thicket of blackpack, the Rangers watched the searching party ride out of the stage depot, with Vince Barlee and Calderon leading the way, and Estabol, Martinez, and two other Mexicans following them. Evidently one man had been left behind to watch Celinda Moore.

Leaving their horses under the trees, the Rangers moved in on the station, Hatfield and Edley to the rear, Travers and Bouchard taking the front. The Mex who had been left on guard was still at the bar, trying to charm Celinda with his toothy grin. He started to draw when Travers opened the front door, but quickly checked the motion when Hatfield slammed through the door at the rear.

The bandit was talking amiably to Travers and Bouchard whom he apparently took to be ordinary bar customers when Fox Edley jammed a gun muzzle against his spine. Hatfield lifted the pistols from the silver-embroidered holsters. As the Mexican sputtered and whirled in frothing rage, Fox Edley laid his barrel across that dark forehead with force and precision. The outlaw dropped at the foot of the bar, and they soon had him trussed up, gagged, and hidden away for safekeeping.

"Thank God you're all right, Jim!" cried Celinda, coming around the bar to grip his arms anxiously: "Vince claimed he killed you!"

"He tried to, Celinda," Hatfield said soberly. "But all he killed was one of your horses."

"You came back—to get him?"

Hatfield nodded. "But it won't be necessary now. Calderon will do that for us."

He introduced her to the other three Rangers. After acknowledging the introductions graciously, Celinda turned back to him.

"You *are* Jim Hatfield, aren't you? I heard Vince say so, and he must have known it all along. Maybe I should have guessed for myself that you are the Lone Wolf. What are you going to do now?"

"Prepare a little reception committee for our friends from Mexico," said Hatfield, with a slow, grave smile.

CHAPTER XI

Trap at Elkhorn

ONCE arrangements had been made for the ambush, Jim Hatfield went out to pick up the Winchesters the Rangers had left on their saddles. It was better to play it safe, even though they might not need carbines for the close work—if the trap they had set worked properly.

The main room of the station was lighted as usual. But now Rangers were

posted at dark windows in the rest of the depot.

Deciding to leave the horses in the blackjack grove, Hatfield had started back with the four saddle-guns when he heard the horsemen returning. But it sounded like far more than a half-dozen riders. He broke into a run for the depot, but instantly realized that he was too late to make it. The Mexicans were coming in too fast.

If they saw him, they'd shy clear of the ambuscade. Maybe he could do more from the outside, anyway. He dropped into a dry, shallow ditch and waited, one of the carbines poised and ready.

Six men had ridden out to hunt for the body of Jim Hatfield, and he had expected only five to come back, leading one riderless horse. But there were about fifteen in this party, and Hatfield knew that the detail his Rangers had followed had joined Juan Calderon's bunch.

When they came into view beyond the station, the tall Ranger spotted the riderless buckskin all right. Barlee was no longer with them. Out on the moon-silver prairie beside the carcass of the bronc he had killed under Hatfield the previous night, Vince Barlee was lying dead, or maybe gutshot and slowly dying. No longer was there a problem as far as Vince Barlee was concerned. But there were fifteen Mexican bandits to contend with instead of the five which he and the three men inside the depot had counted on.

Fifteen Mexicans against four Texas Rangers!

The riders swung around toward the highway as if suddenly scenting danger. Fanning out there in a wide arc, they warily sat their saddles and peered at the adobe building. Hatfield swore silently because his comrades did not have their Winchesters. It had been careless to leave the carbines on their mounts.

Calderon, Hatfield saw, was hanging back and urging the others forward, but for some reason all seemed reluctant to advance. The station looked exactly as it had when they had left, yet they seemed to sense a subtle difference in the place. That subconscious sense which frontier warriors and lawless fugitives alike know must have warned them of danger.

Some of them began shouting to the man who had been left in there, "Pedro! Pedro!" But there was no response. Pedro was unconscious in a storeroom, and couldn't have answered anyway with that gag in his mouth.

Celinda Moore came to the front door and called to them, "Your friend Pedro has drunk himself to sleep, amigos. Come on in. What is the trouble with you?"

"Who else is in there?" demanded Calderon.

"Why, nobody. Just my helpers."

"Go on, move in—move in, men!" Calderon ordered irritably, but he was still hovering well in the background himself.

Obediently his men surged slowly forward, but with drawn pistols or rifles at the ready—Martinez, riding stiff and straight in the leather, fanatical eyes burning in his ascetic face; Estabol, sitting his horse with insolent scorn; and the others, spread out behind them. And in the rear loitered Calderon, still scenting some menace in the tranquil night, keeping out of pistol range of the adobe, and beyond reach of Hatfield's Winchester.

The other bandits had crossed the road into the yard, and were within hand-gun range when from the front corners Red Bouchard and Fox Edley cut loose with their Colts in a lashing crossfire. Milt Travers opened up from a dining-room window, and Jim Hatfield unleashed his carbine across open terrain.

The outlaws fired back, their horses pitching, plunging, and trampling up dense clouds of dust. Ponies and men thrashed down, screaming, in that mad welter. Windows shattered all along the front of the station as the three Rangers inside bore the brunt of the attack.

FIRING as fast as he could jack in shells and squeeze off shots, Jim Hatfield prayed that Celinda was down safely in shelter, and that his partners wouldn't stop any of that lead. Two *caballeros* di-

verged to charge at Hatfield on the outlying flank, their shots showering dirt and stone particles over him, but he dropped them both well short of his trench.

Through hazy curtains of dust and smoke, gun flames torched and gunfire thundered back and forth along the adobe façade, with horses bucking and snorting, and men snarling and cursing as they fought. Behind that dust screen, Juan Calderon had turned and fled precipitately in the direction of Apache Wells and El Paso. And there wasn't a thing Jim Hatfield could do to halt his flight.

More horses were floundering to earth now, trumpeting their anguish and kicking up more dirt, while riderless mounts wheeled and raced away in the darkness. Martinez, still alive by some miracle, was driving his horse straight at the open doorway, until crosswhipping slugs from Bouchard and Travers swept him back over the animal's croup. He bounced and tumbled into a lifeless sprawl in the gravel, and his horse veered off past Bouchard's corner and cut out over the ditch Hatfield held.

Estabol emerged from the smoke on the other flank, stumbling along on foot with pistol ablaze, to shoot it out with Fox Edley. The Fox was sagging, but still upright behind his window sill when Estabol was down groveling and gagging bloodily on the grass.

Survivors who were still mounted whirled then and fled into the night, heedless of everything but getting away from that wicked gunfire. For Hatfield's rifle shots from the side had turned the bulk of the onslaught. A few other wounded bandits, fighting from behind dead horses, fired until their pistols were spent, then surrendered, howling for mercy.

They had made a wild charge, and might have carried the adobe stronghold, if Hatfield hadn't been caught outside with those four Winchesters to work them over from the flank.

It was all over then, the yard littered with dead and wounded men and horses. The last gunshots echoed away across the plain, and stillness surged back, strange and deep after all that vicious racket. Wounded Mexicans rose and reeled forward, bleeding and supporting one another. Hatfield walked in with the carbines, and Travers met him on the gallery. Edley and Bouchard limped out to join them as they looked over the battlefield.

Martinez was dead, along with seven others, and Estabol had been hit hard. But the big boss, Juan Calderon, was gone in the darkness.

"Them Mex owlhoots sure put up one helluva battle," murmured Red Bouchard, brushing adobe dust out of his fiery beard. "They kept coming right into our muzzles. Good thing you was out there with them Winchesters, Jim."

"That they did," Fox Edley agreed, slumping into a chair, his left leg extended straight before him. A dark, spreading blotch was on that thigh.

"You were hit, Fox," said Hatfield. "Let me take a look."

"Just glanced off the hip-bone, I reckon," Edley said. He got up and went hobbling inside with his arm around Hatfield's broad shoulders. The Ranger laid him on the couch, while Celinda brought water, medical supplies and bandages. Edley grinned at her.

"Don't forget the whisky, ma'am. With this Lone Wolf horse doctor, a patient needs plenty anesthetic."

Celinda placed an opened bottle in his hand, and Fox tilted it up gratefully.

When Hatfield had finished dressing and bandaging the Fox's wound, he found that the other Rangers had some lesser injuries. Milt Travers had been nicked on the right arm, and Red Bouchard had a shallow groove in his side. After attending to them, Hatfield turned to the wounded Mexicans. He thought, shoot 'em down, then patch 'em up. An endless vicious circle.

ESTABOL had been badly hurt, as Hatfield had thought, but had a chance of pulling through. The others had painful but not serious injuries, and would live to stand trial.

His surgical duties completed at last, Hatfield helped himself to a big drink and a cigarette, his maltreated head again throbbing with pain.

"Calderon lit out for El Paso, I reckon," he said, grimly. "Soon as I get some food in me, I'm taking after him. You boys stay here with the prisoners for now, and help Celinda clean up and take care of the place. Fox can't ride for a few days anyway, and a little rest won't hurt any of you."

"What about you Jim?" protested Milt Travers.

"I'm all right," Hatfield said. "I'll take my rest after I get Calderon."

"I'll ride with you, Jim," insisted Travers. "This arm's nothing. I'm in better shape than you are with that head of yours."

"No, Milt," said Hatfield, gently but firmly. "I want you all to stay here. There may be some more bandits along any time. You've got plenty of prisoners to take care of, and a lot of chores to do for Celinda."

Bouchard grinned. "It ain't no hardship to work for a gal like her, but I figure like Milt that one of us ought to string along with you. Just because they call you the Lone Wolf ain't no sign you—"

"All right, Red Bush," interrupted Hatfield, with an easy smile. "If you're going to force my hand, I'll make it an order. You boys are needed here, more than you are in El Paso, at the moment."

Bouchard sighed and spread his palms. "I yield the point.—Graceful if not real willing. But this Fox, ain't going to be any help to us here. Now that he's got that scratched leg, he won't do a lick of work for months."

"I'll guard the prisoners, Red Bush," said the Fox. "So you and Milt can do all the labor without being interfered with at all."

"See what I mean, Jim?" groaned Bouchard.

"I'll get you boys something to eat right away," Celinda Moore offered; heading for the kitchen.

"Just come to me," Fox Edley announced. "This Celinda looks a lot like that Rita Farrell girl, only this one's a helluva lot nicer than that witch in the El Paso office."

Hatfield nodded. "It finally came to me too, Fox. And there's a reason for the resemblance. They're sisters."

"Just as much alike as night and day," Bouchard declared. "Funny how the same father and mother can produce one thoroughbred and one ornery cross-grained good-for-nothing."

"You're liable to find Calderon with Rita Farrell," drawled Travers. "She probably just loves Mexicans like him."

"And watch out she don't slip a knife into your back, Jim," warned Edley, "while you're busy taking Calderon."

"I'll watch her," Hatfield promised.

"Maybe I better go out and get the horses," Milt Travers said, and left the others still talking it over.

About an hour later, Jim Hatfield was out on the trail once more, riding a long ribbon of moonlight, bound for El Paso del Norte. On the trail of Juan Calderon, the bandit king of Damirez.

CHAPTER XII

Through the Gunsmoke

NIGHT again in El Paso. There had been rain here, rain from the Franklin Mountains, a sweet rain blowing down from the pass. Adobes glistened bright and clean in the lights. *Acequia* ditches and street gutters gushed musically. The fountains ran full in plazas and patios. Chinaberry and peach trees, poplars and pepper trees were jeweled with brilliant drops. Mission bells chimed clearly on the rain-washed air. Overhead, the moon and stars were scintillating, after the storm.

Jim Hatfield left Goldy at the livery with the friendly hostler who doted on rubbing, grooming and caring for the sor-

rel, and the Ranger went back to the street on legs of wood, his head swollen and pulsating with pain.

He needed food and drink, but a driving impatience would not let him stop long enough for a meal. In a saloon he had a drink of whisky but it was like so much water tonight, and the spicy foods he sampled from the free-lunch table were tasteless to his numbed palate.

Rumors were everywhere; gossip abounded beneath the smoke-hazed lamps. Different stories had it that Squire Stoneham had disappeared, had run out, had been fired, had fled to Mexico, committed suicide, eloped with Rita Farrell. Rangers and Mex bandits, it was being told in awed voices, had fought a great pitched battle at Damirez, with hundreds killed and wounded. Elkhorn Station had been attacked, burned down, wiped off the map. Mexican outlaws were invading Texas! Jim Hatfield, the famous Lone Wolf, was dead.

Other eager gossip spreaders excitedly told how a force of Rangers had been annihilated in a lonely canyon south of the Rio Grande. The bandit chief had been seen right here in El Paso, and excitement boiled over at the report that Rita Farrell was his mistress! Asa Stoneham had caught them together and killed them both!

Fantastic tales in plenty were poured into the dazed Hatfield's ears whenever he stopped long enough to hear.

He had been to the divisional office, but neither Rita Farrell nor Asa Stoneham had been there. Nothing there but more rumors. John Butterfield was coming to clean house on this branch, they said, to fire Stoneham personally. John Butterfield was going into Mexico with a regiment of U. S. Calvary to recover his stolen stage-coaches. It might mean war. The Rangers were marching on Damirez already to avenge their lost company and Jim Hatfield. The man Rita Farrell was engaged to, Vince Barlee, was in league with the Mexican outlaws.

Stories enough to make any man's head swim.

Hatfield had no idea where to start looking for Juan Calderon. It was hopeless to try the Mexican quarters here, and it would be even worse in Juarez. The thing to do was get hold of Rita Farrell, he thought. She had rooms in the Empire House, and Calderon must have come here to see her. Perhaps he wanted the woman himself, which was why he had been so ready to execute Vince Barlee.

Always beneath the surface Jim Hatfield sensed tangled threads of love and hate, private hopes and dreams, ambition and greed, treachery and deceit. How, he thought, could a man who lived by the gun delve into all those mysteries, and come out with a clear straight solution?

He left the barroom and walked along the street, recognized here and there by people who nudged one another and craned their necks to stare and whisper after he had passed. His great height attracted notice, but so also did his strong features which were drawn bleak as bone this evening, from fatigue and pain, from combat and hundreds of miles in the saddle.

The Empire loomed ahead of him, pretentious and elaborate for this country. Thinking of the woman who lived there in luxury, Hatfield spat with distaste. A female like that was more evil than all those Mexican killers, worse than American renegades like Barlee, a blot on all humanity.

If only it were possible to take a gun or a whip or the back of the hand to a she-critter like Rita Farrell, who used her sex as a shield behind which to perpetrate outrageous crimes! She had certainly ruined Barlee, and would no doubt wreck Asa Stoneham, too. A weak man and a strong one, both victims of her abysmal guile and hunger. And to think of the lives she had cost, the good and the bad alike!

AT THE lobby desk, a simpering, pomaded clerk said that Miss Farrell was not home to any visitors. Hatfield flashed his badge, saying:

"I'll just go up, anyway."

In the upstairs hall he paused uncertainly, his legs trembling under him from the weakness of exhaustion. His head ached and the aftertaste of whisky and tobacco was rank in his mouth. He felt a hundred years old, stiff and creaking in every joint, hollow and vacant as a used cartridge case.

Hatfield eased his guns out and into the oiled leather. He was sweating, the sick sweat of fever, and his throat felt choked up tight and dry. One more to look at through gun smoke, then this case would be finished and filed away.

He was suddenly and irrationally lonesome, wishing that his Ranger pards were with him—Milt and Red Bush and the Fox. He was too tired to cut this on his own.

But that's the way it had to be done. He steeled himself and went on in slow saddle-cramped strides, his boots soundless in the thick carpet. Women like Rita sure lived in style, elegance and ease. He thought then of old Stebbins dying in that canyon on the other side of the Border, and muscles ridged his jutting jaw.

The Lone Wolf halted again opposite Number 12, eying the gilt numerals on the doors. He had a feeling now that Calderon was in there with Rita. He hoped so, because he wanted to wind this business up here and now. But he had no illusions about capturing the bandit chieftain alive. Calderon wouldn't hold still for that. It would require gunplay, and Calderon was the one man in the owlhoot band whose gun magic had been rated above that of El Gavilan, the late Hawk of the Border.

He rapped on the panel. There was no response. He knocked again and waited. Still nobody answered. Gripping the knob Hatfield shouldered into the door with a springing surge of power. It gave with a splintering crash, and he was inside a sumptuous sitting room, fragrant with perfume and mellow with lamplight. He kicked the ruined door shut in back of him.

Rita Farrell stared at him and asked, coldly contemptuous, "And what do you want here, you oversized barbarian?"

"First, I want him," Hatfield said, nodding at the man across the room, a man who hadn't even turned from the windows at the Ranger's abrupt entrance. "You're under arrest, Calderon."

The Mexican chieftain wheeled deliberately, eagle eyes flaring coldly, a faint smile under the beaked nose. "You didn't draw, Ranger. You're a fool."

"Don't you try to, or you'll be dead," Hatfield said. "Killed by a fool."

"Go in the other room, Rita," Calderon said, calmly. "You don't have to witness this."

"I want to," she said. "I want to see Jim Hatfield die!"

"Don't make any moves, or you'll get it, too," the Ranger told her. Rita laughed at him. "You haven't got a chance, Ranger. Shoot him in the belly, Juan."

Calderon shook his sleek, black head. "With a man like this, I shoot to kill—and quick. You don't play games with a man of Hatfield's caliber, my dear."

"Get to it then," Hatfield advised curtly.

"You are nervous, amigo?"

Hatfield was silent, watching those bird-of-prey eyes.

"You are the strong, silent *Americano* type?"

Hatfield said nothing, his glance like gray steel on that bold, dark face, the sunny green gone out of his own narrowed eyes. He saw the flitting change in Calderon's gaze that foretold the move, and Hatfield's right hand swung with the other man's.

Flames leaped and merged in mid-room, the concussions blending and beating at walls and ceiling, the lamplight fluttering higher for an instant, wavering inside the glass chimneys. But Hatfield's shot was home first, hard and solid to the body, so that Calderon's hand had been jerked slightly out of line. His bullet punched through a door panel behind the Ranger.

RITA screamed but didn't stir, as Calderon rocked backward and sat down heavily in a chair, doubled over and

clutching at his abdomen. Sweat sprang out in huge beads as he strained to bring his pistol up again, but the shot shredded the rug and floor in front of Hatfield's worn, dusty boots.

Hatfield's barrel dropped back into line from the recoil and tipped a trifle lower, before he let the hammer fall again. Fire lanced simultaneously with a roar, the Colt bucking up against his wrist, and the slug smashed Calderon and the chair over backward. The Mexican spilled from the cushions, rolled onto his back, then squirmed over and went slack and inert, his face buried in the soft rich nap of the carpet.

Hatfield knew Juan Calderon was dead, and so did Rita Farrell.

She cursed him in brothel language, and turned to the bedroom with a wild, broken cry.

"Asa! You've got to do it yourself, Asa! The Mex wasn't up to it. Come out here, you coward!"

The bedroom door opened and Asa Stoneham stood there, all the tragedy and despair of the world in his once fine and distinguished face. A gun hung loosely in his hand, but he seemed to have no intention of using it. His gray head drooped, and his lips writhed under the black mustache.

Hatfield stared at him in pure astonishment, unable to believe his eyes. Not the Squire, not Butterfield's old gunfighting trouble-shooter from pioneer days! Not Asa Stoneham! But there it was, his guilt as obvious as any full confession could have made it.

Stoneham—why he had been the one who had called in the Rangers in the first place, to investigate the theft of the Stage Line's rolling stock! Then Hatfield sighed, as he remembered. Stoneham would have had to do that. Public policy would have demanded it, and public indignation would have insisted on it. If he had delayed, pressure from an aroused and infuriated public would have forced him to call for help. And probably Rita had made him believe that he could get away with it in spite of the Rangers.

"Shoot him, you stupid idiot!" screamed Rita. "Don't stand there in a trance!" She lunged at Stoneham. "Give me that gun! I'll shoot him myself, if you haven't got the guts to!"

She charged into him, clawing at the pistol. Asa Stoneham struck out suddenly with the edge of his palm, knocking her flat and stunned in mid-floor. He stood staring down at her crumpled finery, her coppery head twisted on the rug.

"I ought to use it on her, Jim," he said. "So help me God, I ought to use it on her."

"Give me the gun, Asa," Hatfield said softly. "She'll pay in a harder way than that."

"She won't pay enough. She couldn't pay enough, Jim. That woman! You wouldn't believe it." Stoneham groaned like a man in mortal agony. Then he looked at Hatfield with glazed, horrified eyes. "Shoot me, Jim. Put me down there with Calderon. Be a lot better, a lot nicer and cleaner. Please, Jim! For the sake of the man I was once."

Hatfield shook his dark head. "I can't do that, Asa. Let me take the gun now."

Stoneham hesitated, brooding, broken and dejected. "No, by God, *no!*" He snapped the muzzle up toward his own head, insanity in his eyes and in his haunted features.

Hatfield drove at him in a headlong rush, batting the pistol aside before Stoneham could trigger, flinging the man back into the bedroom as he wrenched the gun from his hand. Stoneham tried to grapple and fight back, gibbering like a maniac now, but Hatfield broke loose and clubbed his gun-barrel across the gray head.

With a sighing, sobbing sound, Asa Stoneham slid to his knees and pitched full length on the floor, unconscious, and at rest for the time being anyway.

Hatfield stood swaying on his feet, looking sadly down at Asa Stoneham. A good man, one of the best in the old-time West, come to this because of a worthless woman, an evil, scheming woman with a lust for wealth and power and luxury.

It wasn't fair that a man should be given appetites which would defeat him in such a manner. But it was life. One flaw, one weakness, was enough to drag a man under. The Squire had been strong enough for anything except a lush, red-lipped, copper-haired girl like Rita Farrell.

SHAKING his head in sorrow, Hatfield walked back into the other room. Rita was sitting up now, sullen and defiant, but Juan Calderon was still lying flat and dead on his face beside the overturned chair. Gunpowder and perfume made a sickening mixture in the lavishly furnished place. Hatfield was abruptly hungry for fresh, open air and wide, clean outdoor spaces.

"What you going to do with me, Hatfield?" demanded Rita Farrell.

"You're going to jail," he said. "And you're never going to get out, if I can help it."

She got up, laughing and flaunting her sex again. "I'll get out. But if you're smart, Ranger, I'll never go to jail. I've got more money than you could earn in a dozen lifetimes." Hands on hips, she pivoted, with arched breasts like those of a model. "And I've got everything else a woman can give a man. We can travel the world over, Jim Hatfield, and own as much of it as we want."

He moved his head slowly from side to side. "No, thanks, Rita. That's not good enough, as long as you're part of the bargain. Come on now—you're moving into new quarters. And don't put up any fuss, or I'll slap you wall-eyed and bow-legged."

She saw that he meant it, and decided to go along peacefully rather than endanger the beauty of her face. "Isn't Asa going, too?" she asked.

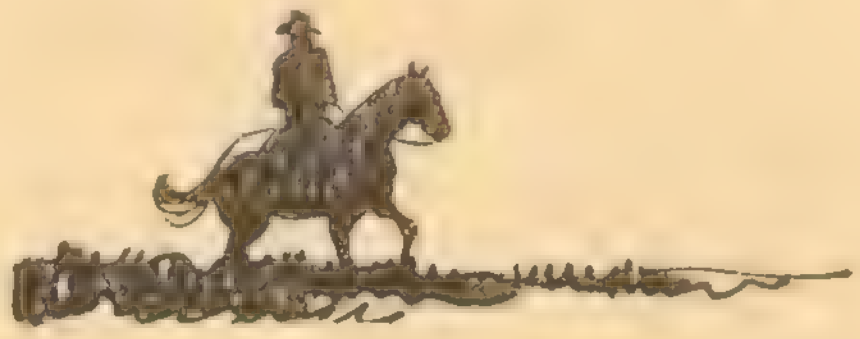
Hatfield stepped into the bedroom and tied Stoneham up with strips torn from a fine linen sheet. "Yes, he's going. Thanks to you."

He led her out through the hall, crowded now with excited guests and employees of the Empire House, but there was no elation and little satisfaction in Jim Hatfield. He was immeasurably relieved to have it ended, and gratified that the Butterfield Stage Line would be restored to link the heart of Texas with the Pacific Coast again. That was all.

Hatfield hoped there wouldn't be any women in the next case that Captain Bill MacDowell dug up for him, which would no doubt be waiting when he reported back to Austin. No women, and no more sex-dazzled and deluded men like poor old Asa Stoneham.

He thought wryly, bring on the badmen, but keep the bad girls out of it. It's tough enough to go against men and guns, without having to tangle with any copper-haired jade-eyed women like this one here.

Outside the night air was cool, fresh and clean, and the wind from the pass blew most of the powdersmoke and perfume out of Jim Hatfield's aching head, as he marched his prisoner to the jailhouse.



Featured in Next Month's Issue

THE CREOLE CURSE

Another Thrilling Jim Hatfield Novel by **JACKSON COLE**

PISTOL POLITICS

By ED MONTGOMERY

She was working up to another scream

After lending a pretty lady his clothes, Sheriff Tom Young is in no fit shape to tangle with a pack of killer outlaws

I'M ROUNDING the bend just before you get to the Cottonwood ford when this scream happens. It starts out sounding like a love-troubled mountain cat and it ends up sounding something like a calf getting acquainted with a running iron, and it lasts for quite a spell in between. It raises the hair on the back of my neck and my horse uses it as an excuse to try to get out from under where I'm sitting.

The scream has a lot more right-awayness to it than what I'm doing at the time, which is trying to get elected sheriff again and a hundred-to-one shot anyway. Me, I'm all for going and finding out about that noise, but Old Red is still trying

to come unbroke on me. I'm studying about applying a .45 barrel between his laid-back ears when I notice he's started gentling down. But I'm just easing back into the part of the saddle where I belong when he gets that kink in his backbone again.

Looking up I see about the third-oldest Donaldson boy, moving fast and scared across the road, busting the middle of a patch of buck brush, and diving into the woods. But what has locoed Old Red is a batch of flapping articles sticking out behind the Donaldson boy. They could be a lot of things, but hanged if they don't look like the garments ladies wear under their dresses, more than anything else.

Plumb mystified, I civilize Old Red up again and point him at where it seems like that scream was. We dodge at a dead run through a sassafrass thicket so tight a smart rabbit would go around it, and we come out on the bank of Blanket Creek, two hundred yards below the ford. I pull Old Red up to scout the lay of the land and the first thing I see is the only thing I see.

It's the part from the chin up of Miss Carolyn Sue Morgan, the schoolteacher back at the county seat. Seeing as how the part of her that's in sight now has always been enough to give me goose pimples clear down to my toenails, I figure it's a good thing Blanket Creek isn't any shallower where she's standing.

AUTOMATIC-LIKE I lift my hat, trying to figure out the look on her face, and it comes to me that she's working up another scream. Quick as a scared bullfrog I jump out of the saddle.

I turn my back square toward the swimming hole. I take three wraps with the bridle lines around my hand in case she does scream.

"Howdy, ma'am," I say hopefully.

She stutters for a while in a voice that's half scared and half mad about something, and all she says that a man could understand is, "Y-y-you!"

After that nothing gets said for quite a spell. I spend the time thinking about whether I'll go back to punching cows or running mustangs come the next day and the election at which Raymond Corder is going to whip me more ways than a farmer can whip a mule, as the saying goes. I take some comfort in the fact that I can't lose by more than about four hundred votes, that being all the people in our county old enough to vote. I figure I'll vote for Raymond, too.

The people of Sharpe County are sure enough off of me, and me, I don't blame them. But it does seem plumb unfair, I tell myself, for those three jaspers to pick the week before the election to rob the Sharpe City express office two nights hand-running, and beat Old Man Higgins over the head with a gun-barrel the first time, and dad-gummed near shot Old Man Higgin's boy's arm off the second time.

I don't figure Raymond Corder will make such a terrible good sheriff, him being a man who needs to spend considerable time playing poker, betting on quarter-horse races, and chasing after women. But still and all, I figure, he'll be better than I am.

Of course if I could round up these three holdup experts between now and the time folks vote next day it would change things square around, which same I have been working on when Miss Carolyn Sue Morgan screams. And instead of going on about my business and maybe finding where these criminals are holed up, I've stampeded in and got Miss Carolyn Sue mad at me, along with everybody else. And she means considerable more to me than one vote, too.

I take myself a deep sigh and think this silence sure is stretching out.

"Swimmin'?" I ask. It doesn't sound too smart after I say it.

"You!" she says again. "Tom Young, you—you—oh!" She stops and I don't like it, but it's sure as the world my turn again.

"That Donaldson boy didn't aim to steal your clothes," I remark. "He was just fixing to tie knots in 'em, like boys do. You spooked 'im when you screamed thataway."

"I'll remember that next time," she says in a different kind of voice. There are icicles on her words.

It's time to take the bull by the horns, I figure. I look for a way to step to one side and give her a grab at the horns. I don't find it. I take a deep breath.

"What," I say carefully, "do you think we ought to do now?"

She doesn't help worth a dime. There's dead silence behind me.

"I reckon," I say, "I could ride back to your rooming house and get you some clothes."

"And have everybody in town talking?" There are no icicles in her voice now. Just sobs. I reckon I'll take the icicles any time.

Slowly I unwrap the lines and drop them on the ground. I pat Old Red on the shoulder till a man watching—the good Lord forbid—would think I'm never going to see him again. I walk, shied around sidewise so I can't look at the swimming hole, over behind a big rock.

REAL quick, before I can think about it much, I take off my shirt and throw it over the rock. I go on from there. The pants are the hardest part. It's like if you ever had a cutting horse you wouldn't part with for anything in the world, and then somebody came along and offered you just too much money for him.

After a little while I hear Miss Carolyn Sue's voice, up real scary close, just the other side of the rock.

"Is that all?" she asks. "Where's—"

"Ma'am," I say quickly, "that's all I wear."

When she speaks again she sounds quite a bit better.

"Tom," she says, "I'll never forget you for this."

It doesn't stand to reason anything could make a fellow in my fix feel good. But I do, for a little while.

"You're just like Sir Galahad," she says.

I can tell from the way she says it that that's good.

"I wonder, could I borrow your horse?"

"Welcome," I say. She might as well. I'm not going to be doing any riding around. Not dressed like a jaybird.

"I'll be back after sundown," she says. "Then maybe you can dress again and ride into town. Maybe you could slip into my room and get me a dress and some things."

I figure a little house-breaking will be easy compared to what I've already done.

"Ride down the river and into that hilly country north of it," I tell her. "Nobody lives in that way, and there's not hardly a chance you'll run into anybody."

Old Red sure does make a lonesome sound, going away.

I sit down easy-like behind my rock. Just me, my hat, my gunbelt, a sack of tobacco, and eleven cigarette papers. I look at the sun and it's still mighty high. I light in to thinking about where I'd be if I was an express robber.

I figure I'd be the other side of the Red River by now. Or maybe holed up in a cave over in Arkansas. But that's the very mistake I've made after the express office was robbed the first time.

I'm still thinking about it, and have already listed a hundred places where bandits could hide in my big old county, when I hear a wagon over on the road. Then I hear a couple more and all of a sudden I realize what just any ordinary chucklehead would have realized a long time ago.

The sun is already turning parts of my hide pink, but I'm still chilled when I remember this is the day for the Sunday School picnic. The picnic grounds are just below the ford, and in thirty minutes there'll be kids and sparking couples all up and down the creek.

Bitterly I put my gun, some extra shells, and my tobacco in my hat. I hide the gunbelt the best I can under some rocks.

I take a long drag on maybe the last cigarette I'll have in a long time, and wade out into the creek. I swim with one hand across to the other side, where willows hang down into the water, and start floating with the current.

Every second I'm getting farther away from where I'm supposed to meet up with

my pants and my horse after sundown. I just float along, half-heartedly holding my hat and stuff out of the water most of the time and not paying much attention to anything. I'm kind of halfway hoping I'll hit my head on a log and drown my fool self, or a water moccasin will swim over and bite me in the neck.

No telling how long I've floated down Blanket Creek before I hear the shots. There are three of them, like three men are trying to shoot at the same time and don't quite make it. Scared? I never have been so scared.

THE FIRST thing I think is that Carolyn Sue Morgan is riding around in that wild country where three cutthroats could be holed up just as well as anywhere else. Seeing her riding the sheriff's horse, with the sheriff's clothes on, if they're a good piece away from her, what are they going to think?

I'm walking out onto a gravel bar before I know it. Finally I realize the rocks are tearing my feet up, and it kind of brings me to what senses I've got.

Those shots, I tell myself, are likely somebody shooting at a deer. Or a turkey. Or a wolf. Or just shooting for fun. It's more likely to be most anything than somebody taking potshots at our schoolteacher.

"Now don't be foolish," I warn myself desperately. "Don't go roaming around the country and come up on a deer hunter and you dressed in your hat and your hide. You'll lose the fourteen votes you haven't already lost when that story gets out."

And having talked sense to myself I keep right on acting foolish. Blackberry bushes rip my legs and still I go on. Because though there's probably not anybody trying to hurt Carolyn Sue Morgan, there *could* be. And I know by now that what happens to that girl is more important to me than anything else.

I aim at the spot where it sounded like the shots come from, and I don't go around the briar patches or plum thickets. I throw away my tobacco, take my spare shells in my left hand and my gun in my right hand, and I plod ahead.

My mind is saying to me that I'm not dressed for a fight, even if I find one. But my poor, bloody, ruined feet keep on walking. It seems like I walk fifty miles, but it's probably not that far, and then I hear a horse nicker. I hobble over behind a blackjack tree and scout the country.

Finally I catch a little ribbon of smoke coming up from a draw a half a quarter ahead. I spot a down red oak treetop at the edge of the draw and make for it, walking bent over. I crawl the last part of the way, holding my breath now and not paying any more attention than I can help to prickly pears and sand burrs.

I take off my hat and ease my eyes up over a bushy part of the leveled tree trunk. So help me, I find myself saying a little prayer of thanks. Because there's Carolyn Sue Morgan.

She looks mad as a woke-up bear, and maybe a little scared, but as near as I can tell she's all right. She's sitting on a saddle blanket on the far side of a cooking fire.

Two tough-looking men sit on each side of the fire. I size them up and I feel a pleased thrill going up and down my naked spine.

Sure as the world they fit the descriptions Old Man Higgins and his boy have given of two of the three bandits—what they could see around their masks.

The range is about fifty yards, which is all I ask for sixgun work. I'm even up with them, because neither has got a rifle handy.

I worry for a little about the third bandit, but there's no sign he's been there, and I figure he's probably split off from the others after the second holdup.

I take me a deep breath, line the sights on the red-bearded feller to the right of the fire, and start to holler for them to throw their hands up. But I don't holler. I lower my gun instead.

It's a hard play to make, but I make it. By catching these two and having them locked up in the county jail tomorrow I turn things my way and win the election

hands down. Show people I'm not the kind of a helpless sheriff they've got me figured for.

But there are more important things than winning elections. And the most important thing is Miss Carolyn Sue Morgan, sitting there so pretty by the fire.

IF I CAN help it, I tell myself, no hot lead is going to be flying around in the same part of the country she's in. I uncock my gun, sigh, and settle back to wait.

I feel sure the two outlaws are going to pull out for faraway places, come dark, and turn Miss Carolyn Sue loose. Folks in these parts aren't much for harming ladies, it being too unpopular.

I meditate for maybe ten minutes on a misspent life and the prospect of going back to working for a living, and then I hear horse talk start up at the head of the draw where I've spotted the bandits' mounts. A horse talks back to them behind me and to my right. I slide out of sight into a bushy part of the tree-top.

It makes me mighty glad I haven't started my gun-play. When I figure it's safe to look again there's another horse at the head of the draw and a man getting off of him. Before he gets to the fire I see who it is, and it leaves me raging like a prairie tornado.

It's Raymond Corder, the son of a half-coyote who's running against me for sheriff. He's pulled those holdups, I realize, to beat me in the race. I imagine the money figured in it, too, but he's picked his time, so it'll elect him.

I start cussing Corder under my breath, but I still figure my hands are tied by Carolyn Sue, and then all of a sudden I see how it is. I go cold all over as it comes to me that Raymond Corder can't let Carolyn Sue go loose to tell what she knows.

I look at my gun hand and it's shaking. That's something I've never noticed happening to me before.

Well, it's three against one, and me scared for the girl. That's a handicap I know the others won't have. On the other hand, I've got surprise on my side. I figure I might as well go ahead and use it.

Raymond Corder is near the others around the fire by now. I slide down to where the down tree trunk is bare, rest my gun hand on the wood, and sing out.

"Get your hands up!" I holler.

The three of them freeze like they are, one reaching over for the coffee pot, one rolling a cigarette, the other just standing there. Slowly the other two look at Corder, and they all three put their hands up.

I size up a big, black-haired man as the tamest of the lot and holler at him.

"You with the checked shirt," I say. "Come over here! Slow!"

He starts, slow. I keep swinging my gun from one to the other and trying to look mean and eager to do some shooting.

"Go by that saddle yonder," I tell the black-haired one, "and bring me that Winchester."

He gets the rifle. I keep from looking at Carolyn Sue, that not being business. I make Black Hair walk around the stump end of my knocked-down tree.

He gets his first look at me and what does he do? He laughs. Chances are he's only a couple of weeks away from getting a rope tied around his neck, and he knows it. But he busts out laughing.

It makes me so mad I get up on my knees, trying to hit him with my left hand and still not get in sight from the other side of the tree. He steps back and I miss and lose my balance. I fall over against the tree trunk and by the time I straighten up the black-haired cuss is pointing the rifle at me.

I twist to the side and he misses but the powder burns my bare side. My own gun roars and the shot slams Black Hair back six feet and into a heap on the ground.

Another gun is talking now. I swing around and snap a shot at Red Beard and miss. I hold a little more careful and knock him down.

RAYMOND CORDER is moving fast, trying to get around the other end of my tree where he can get at me better. I miss him twice on the run, and as I trig-

ger the second shot Red Beard gets up and throws three my way. The third knocks my eyes full of dirt and bark but a fraction of a second earlier I've got off my last shot, and it shuts up Red Beard.

Knowing I'm out of shells I throw my gun away, which gives me one hand to claw at my eyes with and the other to grope for Black Hair's rifle with. I haven't found the Winchester yet when I hear Carolyn Sue scream. I'm kind of used to it by now, and it doesn't throw me. Besides, the scream this time has got my name in it, some way, telling me to watch out.

I guess it's enough to ruin Raymond Corder's aim because he's had time by then to run around the tree top and get a bead on me. His gun roars and nothing happens to me, and I'm seeing a lot better now. I grab the .30-30 and roll over again, levering a shell into the chamber as Corder tries another. I end up in a crooked sitting position. I pull the trigger as the stock hits my bare shoulder and watch Corder stumble back one step, then lean forward and fall on his face.

"Stay back, ma'am," I holler, because Carolyn Sue is headed my way.

She waits long enough for me to get into Black Hair's pants, and I meet her on her side of the log. She gets herself inside my arms and bawls and bawls in a manner that I reckon is plumb satisfying to both of us.

I send her back to the fire and get myself some clothes out of one of the outlaws' warbags, and we light in to waiting for the sun to go down.

It doesn't seem like it'd be very romantic at all.

Because after all there are all these outlaws lying around. And whoever used to own these clothes I'm wearing hasn't been taking all the baths he could have. And my clothes don't fit Carolyn Sue so good, being loose some places and too tight in a few others.

Doesn't seem like it's so romantic, but it is.

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By BEN SMITH

"Give me that rifle, Lee . . ."

When a man's lost he can sometimes find his way back by pure . . .

Dead Reckoning

THE SNOW came in fitful gusts and as Lee Long bowed his head into it the nostril-pinching and face-freezing wind quartered, scattering the last of the leaves from beneath the cottonwood on the cutbank. The hooves of his bay, Prince, clattered on loose shale and then the two of them were over the brow of the hill and into a sheltering wash.

Overhead, the sky was a dirty gray, with darker clouds like puffs of sooty wool that tumbled southward. Already the snow was drifting in the flat places, a cover of frozen wavelets that crunched crisply under Prince's steel-shod feet.

Ahead, just visible through the swirling whiteness, the cut broadened into a valley and the gelding, as though sensing the cover of the trees, broke into a canter.

"Easy—"

Lee slipped a gloved hand forward, tightening the reins across the snow-flecked neck. A steel hoof could easily strike a skim of snow on a limestone slab and both horse and rider would pile in a nasty spill.

The scudding clouds grew darker and the fine powder resolved into bigger flakes that clung moistly to Lee's lean cheek. With ten miles yet ahead of him before he reached the warmth and security of Junction City, a man was wise to ride warily, and while this could be just a snow squall that ushered in winter in this Wyoming country, it could just as easily be a three-day howling blizzard.

The wind had lost its gustiness as the heavier snow fell, and settled into a continual moan that eddied from the rimrock and crept into the quiet places.

His head bowed upon his chest, Lee Long must have dozed, some of the anger in his mind cooled by the touch of the snow, for he was suddenly aware that a new sound had crept into the contrapuntal whisper of the wind. From somewhere to the left, from a spot hidden both by the storm and the trees came a high shout, then the grating sound of steel upon shale.

Prince stopped, ears outflicked, and Lee held his breath, listening. The lull lasted for the space of several heartbeats while even the snow-devils paused in their dance, then the blast of a heavy caliber gun shattered the silence.

HOOFBEATS thundered then, and a horse and rider came obliquely around the edge of the timber stand to vanish into the concealing curtain of white. Lee urged Prince ahead as fast as he dared, mindful of the treachery underfoot, stripping off riding gloves to reach under his mackinaw for the cold butt of his .45.

A moment more and his wary glance took in a spring wagon, with the horse hitched to it floundering in the snow, and a woman lifting futilely on the reins in an attempt to get the animal to its feet. And further along in the snow was a dark mound that was a man. From his body a stain was spreading and blackening the whiteness.

Lee was off saddle, his long legs reaching, boot heels sliding as he ran to the man. The fellow was still alive, moaning softly as that dark ugliness seeped in a large circle upon his heavy coat.

"Matt—Matt!" The woman had left the wagon seat in a flurry of petticoats and dropped to her knees in the snow beside the wounded man. "Matt, are you—"

Lee slipped one hand under her arm, drew her gently to her feet. Standing, her head came barely to the center of his chest.

"What's the trouble here?" he asked her. "I thought I heard a shot."

"Yes." Her eyes were dark with fear, and her face was white except for the twin spots of color painted by the cold. "Somebody shot—Matt!" She looked down at the wounded man with those agonized eyes. "Our horse—the shot frightened him—he tried to run. I—I think he broke a leg."

"So it was a shot," Lee said. "Who?"

"I don't know!" she wailed, twisted loose from him and again dropped to her knees in the snow. "Matt's been—so frightened about something he wouldn't tell me!" She looked up, her eyes searching Lee's bearded countenance. Something she saw there, perhaps the honesty in his gray eyes, seemed to make her instinctively trust him. "You've got to help us!" she said.

Lee lifted his mackinaw, dropped his Colt into leather.

"Nothing can be done for your horse," he said flatly. "Except put him out of his misery. My mount, Prince here, has never worked in harness, but he can try. If it don't work, then your man can ride him and we'll walk. I'll get the two of you out of the storm somehow. And I know a place for us to go."

Her hand was on his arm, as light as the touch of the snow on his cheek. "Is it near?"

"Yeah—it's near," Lee said drily. "Until this morning it was my home. Thirty

minutes ago I was never going back, but—" His eyes grew darker as anger and bitterness returned. "Do what you can for this man," he said. "I'll take care of the horse."

He reached for the saddle-gun slung on Prince's flank. Using this, he could avoid the pleading look that would be in the wounded animal's eyes. A sixgun would take him too close. His face tightened as he lifted the Winchester, looked along the barrel. If only a man could step away from the pain in his own heart!

Behind him he heard the woman tearing a petticoat for bandages . . . .

Flames danced in the wide stone fire place in tempo with the squalls of white wind that swept the valley. The log cabin was snug—as it should be, for Lee remembered grimly the weeks of patient work that had gone into its building. Sheltered on the north by a copse of aspen and birch, the three-room cabin stood on the slope, with the front door overlooking the natural fall of the valley. In the spring the flatland would be knee-high with grass and Sugar Creek, now frozen, would be straining at the clay banks. A man could sit in the purple haze of twilight and watch his cattle feed and grow fat.

A MAN is no good alone, though, and Lee was thinking that as he sat by the fire and cleaned his Winchester and watched the woman he had rescued from the snowstorm. She was bending over her husband, listening to every moan, watching every struggle for breath. The firelight touched the sheen of her hair and retreated, beggared by the comparison. She turned and looked at Lee with shadowed eyes.

"No fever," she said.

Lee nodded, stood his rifle in a corner and walked to the one window that had been glazed. Outside the snow was drifting, had now reached the second log in the wall. Nearly a foot on the level already and falling so fast and steadily that a man could not see more than ten feet before him.

"When he can swallow," Lee told her, "get some whisky and hot water down him. Anything in your wagon you want?"

"The trunk—but it's heavy. Wait a minute and I'll help you with it."

Lee shouldered into his mackinaw. "You stay with him. I'll go look after Prince and bring back your trunk."

There was something about her face, etched by firelight, that brought a throat-tightening memory of Cora, and the reminder left Lee uncomfortably rebellious. Why was it that a woman, even an unworthy one, could become so much a part of a man? Was it because a man could blind himself to unworthiness?

"I don't even know your name," he said abruptly, as he paused on his way to the door, and she faced him with surprise.

"Oh," she said, "that's so, isn't it? Our name is Wills. I'm Elizabeth Wills. Why?"

"I'm Lee Long, and there's no reason why." He put a hand upon the catch of the slab door. "Except that it may be two weeks or so before we can get out of this cabin, and maybe just as long then to dig our way to the surface and see the sunlight.—Keep plenty of wood on the fire."

He was gone, and the snow that had blown in at his exit was cascading like a handful of tiny diamonds to the floor. Matt Wills moaned again and rolled his dark head, and instantly Elizabeth was at his side, watching over him.

In the open doorway of the barn, Lee stood listening to Prince chomping in a bucket of grain. The spring wagon, its shafts drooping in the snow, stood close against the log wall, protected from the wind. Directly it would be time to shoulder that brass-bound trunk in it and take it back to the woman in the house who was waiting for it.

But now, out here in the thick, white quiet, isolated from the world, his mind teemed with questions. Who were these people he had changed his plans to aid? When the letter had come from Cora, and Lee had known that the dream which had been built higher with every log of the cabin wall would never be more than a dream, his first thought had been to leave the place where he had spent so

many lonely but anticipatory hours.

So much here was inextricably tied up with his dream. There was the wide fireplace, the result of days of arduous work, the fireplace he was so sure Cora would have liked. And the hollow wooden trough that would, in the summer, carry the water of a spring higher up the slope directly to the back door of the cabin, a convenience that Cora would appreciate. There was—

Lee struck his hand in anger against the rough wall of the barn and the pain that swept his arm was a satisfying thing. This was a clean, fiery *malaise*—not like the hurt from Cora's letter.

Then again the questions returned—who were these people here in his house, in Cora's house? A man and a woman in a sorry wagon drawn by an old horse that still bore the galls of a plowline. Harmless people, certainly, but enough of a threat to someone to have that someone—whoever he was—follow and shoot them down in a lonely place. Suppose the woman was not the man's wife, and that it had been her husband who had overtaken them and so seriously wounded Matt.

LEE stopped short, remembering the courage in the soft lines of Elizabeth's face, the level dark eyes. No, not that. But Matt, even taking into consideration that he was helpless now, didn't look to be a man who could be a menace to anyone.

Judging by appearances—though Lee knew that such judgment was often ill-advised—Matt Wills could well be the weakest of the pair. He could be a wisher, not a winner. Yet, as Lee shouldered the trunk and kicked a path through the snow back to the cabin, he had a strange feeling of envy for Matt. Whoever or whatever the man was, he held the love of a woman, which made him a better man than the one who had rescued him.

Matt Wills was resting quietly and Elizabeth was stirring something in a kettle near the fireplace when Lee slid their trunk to the floor. She threw back her dark hair with a toss of her head.

"I've been looking around to see what you have here," she confessed. "We'll have to eat."

"How is he?" Lee nodded in the direction of the bunk. "I'll fix something. I've been eating my own cooking for two years now. It should do for all of us."

He wondered at his subtle irritation, mounting as he spoke. Why should he feel that he must defend himself to this woman? Was it because he resented her presence here where Cora should be?

"You've been here two years?" Elizabeth placed the cover back on the kettle, swung it back over the fire. "It must have been lonely for you."

Lee retorted shortly. "It's lonely only when you realize that tomorrow's not coming. I asked about *him*."

Her eyes went to the man on the bunk and the companionable moment was gone. There had been the space of a heartbeat when the cabin had been warm with her presence, when the two of them had been in sympathy. Now, she had left him again.

"He still has no fever." Elizabeth laid a light hand on Matt's forehead. "So there's no infection. The bullet may have touched his lung, but I think it's mainly shock and loss of blood. I have a feeling he'll be all right."

"Your friend back in the valley was in too big a hurry," Lee said. "Or maybe I scared him off. Who was he?"

"I've told you, I don't know."

"Strangers don't shoot other strangers."

Elizabeth sat down on the edge of the bunk, clasping her hands in her lap. "I told you that Matt's been afraid of something for some time. I think that's why we left Texas. And in the last week or so he must have seen some sign—he's been jumping at shadows."

Lee watched the steam thrusting at the lid of the big kettle. It was warm here and the day had been long and hard. Darkness, early because of the storm, was creeping across the slope.

"Texas is a long way from here," he said finally. "Seems strange that a man

would take a woman so far in a wagon like that."

"A man would take his woman to the ends of the earth, if need be," she assured solemnly. "And, to make a home for him, she would go." Unaware of Lee's sudden glance, she finished, "That's his obligation, and hers."

Lee rubbed his thin cheek, confused, and a bit angered at the turn of the conversation. It was almost as if Elizabeth Wills knew him, and knew the decision he had made. It was as if she were well aware of the building and tearing down within his own heart.

"Whoever shot him," he said, almost brutally, "will go back and look, and he'll keep on looking, because he'll never be sure he's done what he wanted to do until he finds the body. Killers are like that. He'll see that you've gone on, maybe guess that someone's helped you, and he'll follow. Because he can figure on a dead man, but a live enemy might have his own gun on his back at any time. So, your friend in the valley will be along."

If he had the thought to frighten Elizabeth into some admission, Lee Long was mistaken. She still sat unmoving, her hands loosely clasped before her, her face composed in the firelight. . . .

THREE days later when the blizzard blew itself out, Matt Wills was able to sit up. Although he still moaned in his sleep, Lee was convinced that it was because of the fear which the night and the man's dreams loosed upon him that caused his restlessness. Elizabeth had refused to leave Matt's side at night, and her eyes were shadowed by weariness.

For Lee, himself, the sunshine at last brought a release from the confinement of the cabin and he roamed far down the valley, seeking the places where the wind had erased the snow from the trail. He was carrying his rifle the day he sighted the buck. Lack of food in the clumps of bare trees on the ridge had prompted the deer to seek the shelter of the valley. One well-placed shot from Lee's Winchester filled the larder for over a week. But upon his return to the log cabin he discovered that his shot also had brought on a crisis.

With the dressed buck over his shoulder, he paused to hang the carcass from the eaves where it would quickly freeze and be out of the reach of predators. And when he turned to the door, he saw footprints in the snow. They were irregularly spaced, like those that might have been made by an injured bear. They extended for the space of a hundred yards toward the brow of the hill, where the snow was disturbed, torn into a series of depressions.

Inside the cabin, Matt was on the bunk, his eyes closed and breathing shallowly, two spots of feverish color burning in his cheeks. Elizabeth was forcing the mixture of warm water, sugar and whisky between his lips.

"Has anyone been here?" Lee hung the Winchester on its pegs over the door, beat the snow from his gloves and placed them on the rough table.

"No." Elizabeth drew a blanket up to Matt's shoulders, tucked it carefully in. "He was sitting up, he had even talked to me a little. I stepped out the door to get wood and I heart a shot, then I heard the door slam. Matt, barefooted, was stumbling up the hill in the snow."

Lee looked again at the sick man, saw that his eyes were open. Matt was staring at the ceiling and his face was white with strain. He licked his lips, turned toward Lee, and their eyes met. Then Matt Wills looked away.

"I fainted," he said. "Elizabeth had to drag me back to bed."

There was an awkward silence while Matt's thin fingers picked restlessly at the clean wool shirt Elizabeth had put on him after dressing his shoulder wound. Lee felt in the pocket of his own levis, found his battered pipe and filled it, hiding his head within the wreath of smoke.

He had no place in the affairs of these two. The fact that he had given them refuge when they had needed it gave him no claim on them. But it was plain to see that there was something unsettled be-

tween Matt and Elizabeth, and that the wounded man was a victim of an understandable fear and some unknown guilt. Although both of them must have been about his age—under thirty—Lee suddenly felt old and tired, and his week-old beard, grown to protect his face from the wind, made him feel unkempt.

"Elizabeth." Matt moved suddenly. "It 's warm out. A walk will do you good. Stay in the bare places."

Elizabeth's gaze passed Lee, going to the wounded man.

"All right," she said quietly. "Maybe it'll be better."

From the window Lee watched her as she picked her way around the cabin and walked slowly down the trail toward the spot where he had shot the deer. When he turned back, drawing on his cold pipe, he saw that Matt had been watching him.

"Lee"—Matt twisted his legs to the edge of the bunk, sat leaning against the wall—"were you in the War?"

LEE took his pipe from his mouth, gazing at the ashes in the bowl. "Sherman's Fifteenth," he said shortly.

"That tells it all then." Matt grimaced with the pain of his healing shoulder. "I was on the other side. Young, and filled with something that passed for patriotism. Texas was a big country and a lot of us were at loose ends. So we went to fight the Federals."

He fell silent, and Lee knew that he was remembering. Matt's eye were hollow pools of pain.

"It was the usual thing and it caused all this trouble," he said abruptly.

Lee held up his hand. "It's better unsaid."

"No, it's not." Matt shook his head wearily. "You saved our lives, back when the blizzard came. My own is not worth anything, but Elizabeth's is. For that you deserve to know why I was shot."

He looked out of the window, trying to see his wife, but she had passed beyond the range of his vision.

"There was a girl," he went on slowly then. "The night a bunch of us left Fort Worth. The story's an old one, I guess. We had been drinking some but that's no excuse, either. And, if I lived, I figured I'd come back to her."

"Elizabeth?" Lee interrupted.

A slow shake of the head. "It wasn't Elizabeth. I didn't even know her then. And the other isn't alive now." Matt buried his face in his hands, trembling as with the ague.

The space within the cabin seemed suddenly to be contracting and the air thick, as if the living and breathing of three human beings had been too much for the inadequate ventilation. Lee opened the door, letting in a shaft of sunlight, bathing his face in the clean, cold air.

"You wife knows this?" he asked.

"No. I've never told her."

"Then you've been a coward three times." Lee refilled his pipe, savoring the aroma of the tobacco. "First, with the girl. Then not telling Elizabeth. And, finally—" he swung about, his face hard—"you married her and tried to hide behind her!"

"My God, man, don't you think I've come to see that?" Wills was on his feet, tottering. "These last days have shown me what I've done."

They looked quickly at the door as there came a fast flurry of footsteps and Elizabeth ran into the cabin, her breast heaving with the exertion of hastening up the slope.

"Rider," she said jerkily. "Down the valley and coming this way."

"Easy now." Lee was moving, his long legs spanning the room in three steps. Holding the Winchester cradled in his arms, he faced them. "It may be someone I know. Someone on a reasonable errand. Let's wait it out."

Matt moved his hand from under the blanket and touched his feet to the floor. "No," he said quietly. "He wants to see me. You'll know who he is, Lee, if you'll think, and you'll know what his business is." He smiled with a somber mirth. "I've run from him long enough."

"Man," Lee said shortly, "you're crazy! You're weak as a new kitten, and with a

stiff shoulder—"

Matt's upflung arm cut off his words. "I'm sane, Lee. Maybe for the first time in my life. Y'see, just being with Elizabeth has taught me many things, and the first is that I'll never be worthy of her. She deserves more than a life of running and dodging." His eyes were suddenly chilled with a strange hardness. "Give me that rifle, Lee. And get Elizabeth in the other room."

Lee laughed shortly, moving restlessly toward the open door. Elizabeth was standing close to Matt, one hand upon his shoulder.

"Lee!"

He turned, looked back at them, saw the blanket fall away from Matt's hand. The snub nose of a derringer looked out.

"Do as I say, Lee."

ELIZABETH looked for the space of a heartbeat first at one, then at the other.

"We'd best, Lee," she said quietly.

Laying his Winchester on the bunk, Lee walked with her toward the door that led to the other room.

The clatter of a walking horse was loud in the yard, the creak of saddle leather, then the fall of a boot upon the door sill.

"Matt Wills!" The voice that spoke was deep, calm, and unhurried, and Lee could plainly hear Wills's reply. "Yes, Steve?"

The thunder of gunfire was loud in the small room, then there was a thick silence cut only by the sound of Elizabeth's weeping. . . .

"It didn't work," Lee Long said.

He leaned on the handle of his pick and kicked the snow from his boot heel. The ground was hard and would be until spring. Still, there were two bodies to be buried.

He put fire to his pipe, blowing his frosty breath at the fuming match, and said softly, "Both with enough guts to keep on, even after they were dying, each trying to kill the other one."

"He was her brother," Elizabeth said suddenly. "Matt talked while he was wounded. Talked in his sleep. You're not keeping anything from me, Lee."

He knocked the ashes from his pipe against a boot heel. "It's better not to try," he said quietly. "You'd always have wondered. And everything a man does shouldn't be held against him." He paused, filled with a strange humility. When he spoke again, it was as if he were talking to himself. "Nor should what one woman's done be held against the world. I guess that's what I've been doing."

And it was true. In the enmeshing of his own life with these two people, one of them now dead, he had completely healed the hurt in himself.

He turned to face Elizabeth and saw her watching him intently, her eyes filled with a softness that might have been gratitude. "What'll you do, now?" he asked.

"I'm going home," she told him simply. "There'll be some there who'll want to know—"

"Texas is a long ways from here," Lee said. "I'll ride along with you, part way, just to see that you get there safely."

Her face was filled with sudden sympathy. "We've spoiled it here for you?"

"No." He paused again, lost in thought. "No, it was spoiled before you came. Now— Well, when I met you, I was figuring on leaving here for good. As it is, I'll soon be coming back."

"There's something saved," she said, "in all this." She indicated the raw scar of upturned earth.

Elizabeth turned and walked blindly toward the cabin. Lee knew that she was going to be with Matt for the last time, and that was as it should be. But he knew that some of the wound in her own heart would be healing, too. And should he ride with her as far as Texas, he knew he could come back to this valley with his soul in peace, for in living these short days so completely in sympathy with the sorrow in the lives of others he now had the strength to meet his own.

And, it could be, must be!

When he came back to this valley, he was suddenly sure that he would not come alone. ● ● ●

LOST

The Wild Bunch gave young Riley Branam a chance to get out of the game. But an owlhoot past throws long shadows. . . .

MOUNTAIN

a novelet by LOUIS L'AMOUR

CHAPTER I

Rookie Outlaw

WHEN Jim Colburn rode up to the camp at sundown he was not alone. There was a gangling kid with him, a kid with narrow hips and meatless shoulders and chest, and the old Navy .44 he wore on his leg looked too big for him despite his height.

Jim Colburn was a tough man, fit to ramrod a tough outfit. He swung down and looked around at Kehoe, Weaver, and Parrish.

"This here's Riley Branam," he said. "He's riding with us."

Parrish was stirring beans and he just looked up out of those slate-gray eyes and said nothing at all. Weaver started to say

Suddenly, Nick Valentz was sprawled out in the stream

something, then turned away, but he looked angry. Kehoe looked at the kid, dropped his cigarette and nodded. "Howdy," he said.

They ate in silence, then the kid moved over to help Parrish clean up. Nobody said anything until Colburn had a boot off, and then he said:

"I got myself in a corner." He jerked his head toward Riley. "He got me out of it."

At daybreak they moved out, four hard-bitten outlaws and a lean, raw-boned kid on a crowbait buckskin. Kehoe was lank and lazy-acting, Parrish stocky and silent, Weaver a brusque and angry man. Jim Colburn was the leader, the planner—and a good man with a gun. So were they all.

Weaver's irritation was obvious, but he said nothing until they stopped at the spring outside of town.

"Same as always," Colburn said. "Parrish with the horses. Weaver, you and Kehoe come with me."

Weaver did not even look at Riley Branam. "What does *he* do?"

"He'll ride down by that big cottonwood and get down. He'll stand right there until we come by, and if there's shooting, he'll cover us."

"That'll take nerve."

Riley Branam's tone was even. "That's what I got," he said, looking at Weaver.

Weaver ignored him, but stepped into the leather. "You never been wrong yet," he said to Colburn; and then they rode.

It was clock-work. They rode in, and the kid rode on to the cottonwood. He swung down and he stood behind his horse looking down the street. All of a sudden Kehoe, Weaver, and Parrish came out of the bank door they'd entered and stepped into their saddles. Their horses started to move.

The banker rushed into the street with a rifle. The kid turned lazily with his Winchester in his hand and shot at the hitch-rail, in front of the man. Splinters flew, and the banker jumped back inside the door. The kid went into saddle and they all rode out of town.

THEY held to the trail for a mile, then turned into the desert, down a wash, doubled back, and then as they rode on the kid cut out and started a bunch of cattle over their tracks. They were in the brush, out of sight of pursuers.

At a stream he let the cattle go. They rode in and followed the stream a half-mile, then cut into the hills. Pursuit never came close.

The take had been small. Weaver looked irritated when an equal share was counted out to young Riley Branam.

In the next month they made two more strikes, and the take was equally small. Riley helped around camp, talked little. Parrish accepted him. Weaver was angered by him, Kehoe studied him. And Colburn shrewdly let things ride.

Loafing on the street at Bradshaw, watching the bank there, Weaver said suddenly, to Kehoe, "I had about enough of that kid. What did Jim ever bring him along for?"

Kehoe shrugged. "He ain't a bad kid. Leave him alone."

"Something about him gets on my nerves!" Weaver was angrier than usual. "And we don't need him."

"Don't you brace him," Kehoe advised quietly. "You'd get a shock."

"What you mean?"

Kehoe brushed the ash from his cigarette. "The kid's gun-slick."

"Him?" Weaver was contemptuous. "For two-bits, I'd —"

"He'd kill you, amigo. You wouldn't have a chance. I've been watching him. You watch and see. Nobody moves, he doesn't see them. He's like a cat when he moves, and he never gets his right hand tangled up. When he lifts anything, it's always with the left."

Twice, on bank jobs, the kid had to shoot. Neither time did he kill. Each time he shot to frighten, and his bullets were close—very close. Weaver grudgingly accepted him, Parrish often rode beside him, but only to Kehoe did he ever talk.

When they were over the Border, the kid spent little money. Weaver was usually broke within a few days, Parrish al-

most as soon, but Riley Branam drank little and never gambled.

Over there, one day, Weaver crawled out of his blankets with a headache and looked around. Parrish was cooking, Kehoe and Colburn were gone.

"I tied one on," Weaver said. "You got a drink "

Parrish shook his head, but Riley turned to his blankets and pulled out a bottle. "Hair of the dog," he said, and tossed it to Weaver.

Weaver looked at him, then opened the bottle and drank. "Thanks, kid," he said.

"Keep it," Riley said. "The way you headed into it last night, I figured you could use it today."

He got into saddle and rode away. Weaver stared after him. "Maybe I had that kid wrong," he said.

"You did," Parrish said. "He's a good kid."

Weaver had another drink, then corked the bottle and put it away. He seemed to be thinking of what Parrish had said.

"That's the trouble," he said finally. "He is a good kid."

Parrish looked up, tasting the stew.

"Yeah," Weaver went on, "he doesn't fit. He should get out of this line."

Two days later when Weaver was alone with Colburn, he asked, "What happened that time, Jim? When you picked the kid up?"

Colburn was shaving. He peered into the cracked mirror and sawed painfully at his grizzled jaw. "Poker game," he said. "It was crooked. I caught the shark with an extry card, then I saw two guns on me. Then the shark drew his. One of them says, 'We know you, Colburn. S'pose you go to the law?' Then he laughed."

Colburn scraped his jaw for a minute, then said, "I wasn't going to take it. I'd had a drink. and I was sore. I would've been killed. Then this kid that was standing there, he shucks a gun. "All right," he says. "Deal me in, too. Or give him back his money."

"They all stood there and sweated, and so did I, but they didn't like it none, and the kid, he stood there just as quiet as could be. Thing was, they knew this kid. I seen that right off. Then this gambler, he shoved my money at me. 'All right, Branam,' he says. 'You win this time. But you show up around here again and we'll kill you!' "

WEAVER squinted his eyes against the sun. "He should get out of this business," he repeated. "It ain't for him."

They holed in that time in back of the Little Green below the Diamond Rim. There was an undercut cliff there masked by willows, and a spring creek that fed down from the Rim. It was quiet, out of the way, and with plenty of good graze for their horses.

Weaver was washing a shirt down at the Little Green, watching the horses when Riley came down. He picked a spot close by and shucked his own shirt. Weaver saw three bullet wounds on his hide. He didn't ask, but Riley explained them.

"When I was a kid," he said, "just before I met up with you fellers—maybe a year before—fellers come in and started making a gather of our stock. Pa and me went to stop 'em. They killed Pa. And shot me up some."

"Get any of them?"

"All of 'em. Three then—two later."

Weaver squatted on his heels and lit a cigarette. "Kid, I been figuring back. You got maybe six thousand dollars saved."

Riley Branam said nothing at all, but Weaver was amused to see the way that right hand stayed out of the water. The kid was careful, and Weaver liked that. He never did like a cocky kid. He liked them sure, careful—and honest.

"Jim," Weaver said, "is pushing forty. Me and Parrish is upwards of thirty-four. Kehoe, he'll soon be thirty. We been outlaws six to ten year. We ain't never going to be anything else until we get too old."

Riley said nothing, but he mulled around in the water with his shirt and some cactus soap.

Weaver squinted his eyes. "Kid, this here life gets you nothing. Jim Colburn's a shrewd and careful man. He's smart,

we're careful, and we been lucky. It won't last. One reason we hold up here—Jim's scared."

"He ain't scared of nothing!"

"Not rightly speaking, he ain't. What he's scared of is the odds. We been too lucky. It can't last."

"What's all this talk lead to?"

"You, kid. Get out of this business."

Weaver reached from behind him to his saddlebags. He took out a poke of dust, a few nuggets and coins. He tossed the poke to Riley.

"There's a thousand there. Take it, put it with what you've got, and buy some cows. Start yourself an outfit."

Riley looked at the money, then at Weaver. "You're trying to get rid of me?"

"Uh-huh." Weaver rubbed out his smoke. "I am. You ain't cut for it, kid. You ain't a crook, and that's good. You don't like to kill—I been noticin' how you shoot to scare. But some day we'll get in a tight where we'll have to kill."

"I'll kill."

Weaver was a serious man. He took his shirt out and began to squeeze out the water. "I know it, kid. You've killed already, but you were in the right. You kill now, it'll be different."

"What'll Jim say?"

"He likes you, kid. Like a son. He'll be pleased. So will us all."

"I can't take your money."

"You ain't taking it." Weaver shook out his shirt and hung it on a bush. "Some day I'll be all stove up and too old to ride, then I'll come to you and you can fix me up in a shack on the place, and let me kill some honest beef."

They walked back to the others and Riley could see by their faces that they had known about the talk. Colburn got up as he came near. He had a poke of dust and coins.

"Three thousand here, kid. We're all buying in. You start that outfit."

CHAPTER II

The Girl They Wanted

THERE was nobody living in the Lost Mountain country, not even an Apache. Riley Branam built his cabin at the head of a mile-long canyon that looked out onto a wide sagebrush flat. He had come in over that flat, and there was plenty of grass. He built his cabin and he took his time. It felt good to have an ax in his hands again; it felt good to be building.

Rimrock, the nearest settlement, was a town unpeeled and raw. It was a dusty avenue of cottonwoods and false-fronted stores. It was a one-doctor, two-lawyers, five-saloons town. It was a town with two water troughs, a deep well, and good home-made whisky. It was a town with eight prosperous ranches nearby, a couple of lean mining prospects and a small, tightly knit society composed of the eight ranchers, the doctor, one of the lawyers, the preacher, and the newspaper editor.

It was a town where a man named Martin Hardcastle owned the leading saloon. He was a big man with a polished, hard-boned face, slicked-down black hair, and a handle-bar mustache. And among the regulars at the saloon were Strat Spooner and Nick Valentz and, locally, they were tough men.

Riley Branam came into town and rode to the bank. He got down warily, it being his first friendly apearance at a bank. Old Man Burrage looked up when Riley stopped by the gate leading to his desk.

"Want to make a deposit," Riley said.

Burrage measured him with quick, gimlet eyes, then jerked a head at the cashier. "See him."

"You're the boss. I'll see you."

Burrage nodded, indicated a chair. Riley Branam put ten thousand dollars in gold on the desk and said quietly. "I want to deposit that. And I want to buy cows."

Burrage opened a sack, then shot a quick look at the boy. "That's money, son. How'd you come by it?"

Riley Branam did not reply, but Burrage began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. It irritated him that a boy of no more than twenty could make him feel that way. He started to speak, then changed his mind.

"The Lazy O has some longhorns they'll sell," he finally said.

"I want white-faced stock. This new stuff."

"The only man around here with whiteface cattle is Dan Shattuck. He won't sell."

Riley Branam walked from the bank to the general store and bought supplies. At the livery stable he bought a buckboard and a team of mules.

Strat Spooner, one of the two local toughs with a rep was a long, tall man with stooped shoulders. The feet he shoved into his boots were bare, and he carried a low-hung gun that he could use. Rimrock had a tough name, but there had been only one gun-fight in the street. In that fight Strat Spooner had killed a man who, until then, had been known as the fastest man around Rimrock. But Strat Spooner had killed another man in Durango, and one in Tucson.

His shirt was always open at the neck and rarely clean. His eyes were white-blue and he chewed tobacco. He was a taciturn man whom nobody wanted to cross. Occasionally he punched cows, sometimes he drove travelers on buckboard trips. The rest of the time he loafed around the Verde Saloon. His credit was good with Hardcastle, who owned it.

Strat Spooner saw Riley Branam go into the bank with several heavy sacks. He saw him leave without them. He saw him load the buckboard with supplies, and he knew who had owned the mules. Riley was tall, easy-moving and quiet. He was also good-looking in a shy but rugged way. Strat Spooner decided he did not like him. He shrugged, and turned away, to watch Marie Veyre ride into town with Pico, a Mexican rider from her Uncle Dan Shattuck's ranch.

Pico had been riding for Dan Shattuck ever since Shattuck had left the Brazos. The vaquero was fifty, but rode like a man of twenty, and looked to be thirty. He, too, glanced at the buckboard, and inclined his head toward Riley.

"New hombre," he said quietly.

Marie laughed. "Pico, will you never stop trying to marry me off?"

PICO did not smile. "Your uncle, he is busy. Your mother and aunt, they are dead. Who is to look after you if not Pico?" He glanced again at Riley. "He is a handsome hombre, and he has got good mules. I know those mules."

Yet he hesitated as Riley Branam led his horse around to tie to the tail-board of the buckboard. Pico had been up the creek and over the mountain, and he knew that common cowhands do not have horses like this splendid Morgan. The long-legged crowbait Riley had ridden to join Colburn had not lasted. Outlaws ride good horses—it is a matter of survival. The Morgan was soot-black.

Marie Veyre had her share of curiosity. She, too, looked at Riley, and looked again.

The two years of riding with Colburn had done things to Riley Branam. He was over six feet—he had been when he'd joined the Colburn bunch—but he had filled out to an even one hundred and eighty. His face was dark from wind and sun, his step easy, his manner reserved, even gentle.

Riley turned and, turning, saw Marie. Their eyes met across the buckboard, and he flushed, but then he saw the brand on her horse.

"From the Running S?" he asked, and moved around the buckboard. He had assurance without boldness. "I'd like to buy some whiteface stock from you."

Pico sat his horse, his mahogany face inscrutable, yet his eyes were measuring, careful. Here was no common boy, no incidental man. This man, too, had been up the creek and over that mountain.

"Uncle Dan never sells his stock," Marie told Riley. "There are too few Herefords out here." Relenting a little, and also with an idea that she might see him again, she added, "But you might talk to him."

They rode on, and Pico was silent. Marie looked at him quickly. "What, Pico? No urging? No seal of approval?"

The Mexican shrugged. "I do not know, chiquita, this one. He has done much riding."

Sensing Pico's reserve, Marie glanced back, suddenly intrigued. For Pico to say a man had done much riding—She had heard him say it of few men, her Uncle Dan for one. It could be a compliment, but it was not always so.

Strat Spooner watched them ride by, his eyes following Marie. He wanted Marie Veyre. She awakened a savage lust within him that startled even him, but Strat Spooner was a cautious man, and there was something about Pico he did not like. Pico, he felt, was dangerous. Spooner did not doubt that he could beat Pico—but knew he would have to. And such a man can take a lot of killing.

Rimrock was a small town, so it was not long before Marie knew that Riley Branam had deposited ten thousand dollars, that he had bought supplies for an extended stay, that he had squatted at Lost Mountain, and that he had hired a Mexican hand named Cruz, a lean, hard-riding vaquero, whip-fast and bull-tough. He also had hired a loafing cowhand—a top-hand on any outfit when he worked—named Darby Lewis.

Hardcastle knew this also, and Hardcastle was a man with resentment. He had not been accepted by the tight little group in power in Rimrock. Moreover, Hardcastle was a man with a lust. Power, after a fashion, he had. In the limited circle of country around Rimrock, he was a personage. The one thing he wanted was Marie Veyre.

That he had spoken of that to Dan Shattuck was a fact known only to Dan, and to Pico.

It had come on a lazy Sunday afternoon when Marie had been visiting at Oliver's Lazy O. Dan Shattuck had been working over his books in the room in the ranch house he called the "office." Pico had been braiding a horse-hair bridle in front of the bunkhouse.

Hardcastle had driven up in a freshly painted buckboard, and he had been dressed in a black suit and a starched white shirt. Pico had watched him get down from the buckboard but had remained where he was. When Hardcastle had rapped on the door Shattuck himself had let him in, obviously surprised.

A tall, fine-looking man with white hair and finely cut features, Shattuck had ushered Hardcastle into the office and seated him. He had been puzzled, but suspected it was some ranching business.

Hardcastle was forty-five years old and weighed two hundred and forty, not much of it excess baggage. He carried himself well, and he could at times be suave and adroit. He had not been so now. He'd seemed to be a little astonished at what he was doing, but had convinced himself his suit would be accepted.

He'd put his big hands on his knees. "Dan," he'd said abruptly, "I'm a wealthy man. I'm healthy, and I've never been married, but I've decided it's time."

Shattuck had never know Hardcastle except as the proprietor of a place where he occasionally bought a drink. He'd been still more puzzled when Hardcastle had said:

"I figured the right thing was to come to you first."

"Me?"

"Yes, Dan. You see, it's Marie I'm thinking of."

Dan Shattuck had been completely astonished, then angry. Hardcastle ran a saloon—an accepted business—but he had a hand in other entertainment in the town, a fact not unknown to Shattuck or some others, although Hardcastle believed his tracks had been well covered.

Dan Shattuck had got to his feet abruptly. "Then you can stop thinking," he'd said coolly. "When my niece marries it will not be to a saloonkeeper who also

traffics in women. Now get out. And if you ever venture to speak to my niece I'll have you horse-whipped and run out of town!"

Hardcastle's face had turned red, then white. He'd started to speak, then had got to his feet, his hands shaking, his eyes bulged. But he'd been unable to make words come. Abruptly he'd turned, left the house, and driven off in his buckboard.

Pico had put aside his bridle and walked slowly toward the house. He'd stood there, his hands on the porch rail, while Dan told him what had happened.

"If he ever so much as makes a move toward her," Pico had said quietly then, "I'll kill him. . . ."

That had happened two years before, and Dan Shattuck believed it was over and done with. Pico was not so sure. He had not missed seeing the way Hardcastle's eyes followed Marie whenever she was in sight.

Three weeks passed and nothing more was seen of Riley Branam in Rimrock, and then the rumor reached town that he had thirty head of whiteface cattle on his place at Lost Mountain. He had bought them from a trail driver moving a mixed herd through New Mexico. He had two bulls, old but still useful.

Darby Lewis brought the news to town, and Hardcastle listened, then bought a drink.

"What's this Riley Branam like, Darby?"

The cowhand shrugged. "Can't figure him. He's a hand. Knows cattle, knows horses. And he's a better than fair shot with a rifle, judging by the antelope he knocked over on the ride."

"Lot of money for a man that young," Hardcastle suggested. "How'd he come by it?"

Lewis shrugged. "Mined it, likely. What I hear, half of it was dust and nuggets."

Hardcastle was thinking. He'd never forgotten the abrupt manner in which Shattuck had turned on him, nor the words the rancher had used. It had looked as if Hardcastle would never have Marie as long as Shattuck was alive and strong, but now he thought he saw an opening. . .

Pico met Riley's vaquero, Cruz, on the street and they went to a cantina together. Tia Morales's place, on a back street. The big Pico and Cruz, rapier-thin and rapier-dangerous were old friends. Pico had been in the fight when Cruz had got his scarred cheek.

Pico asked many questions about Branam, while the other vaquero sat silent.

"This one," Cruz finally said, and it was all he would say, "is a man. . . . "

MARIE VEYRE'S curiosity was piqued by lack of information concerning the rancher of Lost Mountain. One day she rode out past Cathedral Rock where she could look across Coffee Creek Flat up toward Lost Mountain. It was good range Branam had chosen, but how could he do anything with just thirty head of cattle?

Nor had she failed to notice her uncle's displeasure at the news. He had liked owning the only Herefords around. Now they were not the only ones.

She rode on, stopping to water her horse in Coffee Creek. Riding along the bottom of the draw she let her horse walk slowly upstream while she enjoyed the cool shade under the trees after the hot

ride in the sun. Suddenly she drew in sharply. Sitting his horse not a dozen yards away was Nick Valentz, from Rimrock.

He was a big, rough-handed man, and she did not recall ever having seen him anywhere but around Hardcastle's saloon. and at a distance.

He looked at her coolly. She was abruptly and acutely conscious of her figure, of the way her breasts tautened the material of her blouse. She wished she was away from here—anywhere but here.

"You're quite a woman, Marie," Valentz drawled, and smiled insolently. "And quite a ways from home."

To ride ahead would be to ride nearer to him. to turn back would be to ride down the green tunnel under the trees which she had followed for nearly a quarter of a mile. She decided it would be safer to go ahead, for if he followed her into that tunnel—

She started her horse and when near him, reined her horse out to go around. Promptly he pushed his horse ahead of her, still smiling, that same lazy, insolent smile.

"Are you going to get out of my way?", she asked sharply.

"Ain't decided."

He rested his big hands on the pommel and grinned around his freshly rolled cigarette. She was mighty pretty, but if she kicked up a row he'd have to leave the country. But would she?

CHAPTER III

Trouble Building

MARIE VEYRE was in a quandary. When Valentz moved his horse forward he had blocked her off from the easy bank. Now she faced a steep four feet of earth topped by trees and brush. Abruptly she swung her horse, but he reached out and grabbed her bridle.

Instantly, she swung her quirt. The lash slashed across his face, then his hand. With a yell he jerked back. Then, white with fury, he lunged his horse at hers.

And something unexpected by either of them happened.

A rope shot out of nowhere and Nick Valentz left his saddle. He lit, all sprawled out, in the foot-deep stream.

Marie looked up, and her heart missed a beat. Riley Branam was on the bank, sitting his black horse. Valentz started to get up, but the black moved and he was spilled again. The black headed off, dragging him a few yards in the water.

Riley smiled at Marie. "Morning, ma'am. This feller seemed to need a little cooling off."

She rode up on the bank. "Drown him, for all I care!" Then she smiled, but her face was still white. "I must thank you." The black horse backed quickly and Valentz was spilled again.

"It's a pleasure." Riley's grin was frankly humorous.

"I've missed seeing you around for awhile," she said.

"Went east," he explained. "After cows."

The black horse swung and the rope again spilled Valentz as he climbed, spluttering, to his feet, only to go down, sprawling at another jerk on the rope.

"I'd like to see your ranch," Marie said to Riley. "I've never been to Lost Mountain."

The black horse swung and Valentz was dragged out on the bank. Leaving the horse to hold the rope tight, Riley went down the rope, jerked the water-soaked man to his feet, and shook off the rope.

"Next time,"—Riley's voice was not pleasant—"get out of the lady's way."

"Next time I'll kill you!" Valentz stepped back, his hands wide.

"Why wait?" Riley Branam's voice was suddenly quiet, almost toneless. "Any time."

Usually Nick Valentz tried to live up to his rep of being a tough hand. But now he heard something in that voice he did not like. Once he had seen Wes Hardin kill a man, and Hardin's voice then had

sounded something like Branam's did now. Valentz thought about it, decided to try it, then changed his mind.

He turned carefully and walked to his horse. When he was in saddle he looked back. Riley Branam had not moved. Valentz started for Rimrock, a thoughtful man.

Hardcastle was secretly pleased when he saw Valentz's fury. It would be a convenient weapon for him to use himself. He was equally pleased at hearing about the meeting between Marie and Riley Branam. It never even occurred to him that Marie Veyre could possibly be even slightly interested in the strange rancher, and it fitted in with some secret plans he had made to have them meet.

Hardcastle had been making discreet inquiries down the trail. But nowhere had he discovered any trace of a man known as Riley Branam. None of the men in the mining districts knew him, and he was not wanted anywhere. Yet the saloonman was not too disappointed, for he realized that no honest man could be so hard to trace.

Twice during the next ten days, Riley Branam bought cattle. He had put the word out that he would accept any healthy whiteface stock, pure or mixed breed. The stock he bought was all from trail herds and he paid good prices, but he was building his own herd.

Often as Riley went about his work he found himself pausing from time to time to look off across the hills toward the distant Running S—and Marie. Cruz noticed that, but the vaquero merely smiled and hummed a Mexican song, and said nothing.

THE LITTLE herd had grown to two hundred head. Only about fifty head were pure whiteface cattle, but the others were good stock, mixed breeds, and the two bulls were pure. Riley was buying breeding stock—only a few steers, mostly cows. Cruz had noted that Riley spent more time over the cows and chose them with care.

There was much to do. Cleaning water holes and enlarging springs, digging out a couple of basins for the water to gather in quantity, hunting mountain lions and wolves, building corrals and a stable.

Several times, when riding, Riley came upon tracks in the hills. Once when Cruz was with him, Riley stopped to examine the tracks. It became plain to him that someone had been spying on his work, watching from various hiding places.

Valentz? Some stranger? Or someone from one of the older outfits? And it was in that moment of puzzlement that nostalgia gripped him, and he found himself wondering about the bunch. He'd had no news, and almost a year had gone by.

Cruz, watching his face as he studied the tracks, was curious.

Two or three strange riders, he knew, had dropped in at Hardcastle's saloon. They had talked with Strat Spooner there, then drifted on. Cruz had been in town and had seen two of them. One rode a gray mustang with a broken hoof. He had mentioned it, casually, to Branam when he got back to Lost Mountain.

Now Riley Branam was seeing that track near Coffee Creek. . . .

One bright afternoon, Marie Veyre ran into a friend of hers on the street in Rimrock—Peg Oliver, a short, plump girl with a quick smile and dimples.

"Marie," Peg said, "one of the girls is saying you know that new rancher, Riley Branam."

"A little." Marie caught sight of him down the street at just that instant. He was tying the dusty black at the hitchrail. "Why?"

"We're having a party at the Lazy O. Why don't you bring him? Or anyway ask him over?"

Marie's pulse jumped a little. She knew instantly it was just what she wanted to do, but was cautious.

"I don't know him well," she demurred. "He—he seems sort of mysterious."

"I know. Isn't it exciting?"

Riley Branam at one of their parties! Marie tried to picture him with the group

and found it remarkably easy. Tall, serious. hard-working as he was, he would fit right in.

Excited, she went on toward the store. Uncle Dan Shattuck was there talking to Sheriff Larsen, a big, ponderous blond man.

When Larsen had gone, Marie said, "Uncle Dan, Peg wants me to invite Riley Branam to their party."

Dan Shattuck's face tightened ever so little. "Marie," he said quietly, "I wouldn't. Not right now."

She had never seen him quite like this. Shattuck was a little stiff for a Western man, but he was friendly.

"You're jealous!" she taunted. "Just because he's buying whiteface cattle!"

"No, it's not that." He looked down the street. Cruz, in a short Mexican jacket, had come into the street, walking his zebra dun. Shattuck shrugged. "It's—Marie, we're losing cattle."

Shocked. she stared at him. He put his hand on her arm. "Remember, we don't know anything yet. But I'd hold off any invitations. It might save embarrassment later."

Feeling a little dazed, she watched her uncle walk away, suddenly aware that without realizing it she had allowed her thoughts to turn more and more toward the hard-working young rider of Lost Mountain. But what did she know about him? What had he ever said about himself? To anyone?

She remembered Pico's reserve. His comment that the young man had ridden a lot of trails. She remembered Riley's cool, expert handling of Valentz, who was supposed to be so tough, and the way Valentz had backed down. She had never told her uncle about that, afraid he would face Valentz himself.

MARTIN HARDCASTLE was standing in the door of his saloon when she passed. As he looked at her and smiled a little, it was a curiously triumphant smile. Puzzled by it, she walked on to the post office. Pico was loafing there. He seemed in a deeply serious mood.

"There is trouble coming, chiquita," he told her gently. "Be careful when you ride alone."

Dan Shattuck was not the only one who had been losing cattle. Oliver had lost some, and so had another rancher named Holton. Both visited Sheriff Larsen.

Larsen listened to their complaints and nodded. "I vorking," he said in his slow voice, and he took down the facts they gave him in a precise handwriting that was like a woman's.

That night rain swept the range, a sudden, drenching downpour that turned into a cloudburst. Cruz had one boot off when he heard a rider. He went to the window, peered out.

It was a strange rider on a fine dark horse. The man took the horse into the stable, but did not come to the bunkhouse. Instead, he went slopping through the stable door toward Riley's own quarters.

Riley heard the knock and got up. Rain was thundering on the roof. The lamp flame flickered and almost went out when he opened the door. His visitor was Kehoe.

Inside, Kehoe shed his slicker and accepted coffee gratefully. His thin face was hard, but there was brightness in his eyes. He looked around.

"Nice, kid. Mighty nice. Better than we've got."

"Part of it is yours."

Kehoe shook his head. "Maybe. We'll see."

It was good to see him. Of them all, Riley had been closer to Kehoe than to any of the others. They had been saddle partners.

"We've had bad luck," Kehoe was saying quietly, "and we're holed up. Parrish caught one, but he's better now."

Riley was curious about the object of this visit as he got down some beans and beef and put them on the stove to heat. Kehoe had not stopped here by accident.

Suddenly Kehoe looked up. "Kid, you had any trouble?"

"No."

"You will have. There's a word around.

Somebody has been hiring some salty riders, rustlers, gun-slingers. You remember Desloge?"

"Little fellow—one we ran into near Lordsburg?"

"That's the one. He's been asking about you. Seemed almighty curious what had become of you. We tell nobody nothing, but he's kept coming back, asking questions. He's teamed up with a gunman named Gus Enloe, a bad number. Weaver took out and tailed them through the hills. and they headed this way."

"Thanks."

Kehoe got up.

"I'd better go, kid. No use to get you into trouble."

"Go in the morning. Not in this rain."

Long after the outlaw was asleep, Riley Branam lay awake. Kehoe was tired. The man slept as if dead-beat. And it had probably been months since he had slept in a bed. Kehoe's boots were worn, his clothes shabby. Suddenly, despite his nostalgia for his few real friends, Riley knew that they had been right—the outlaw life had never been for him.

Kehoe was awake and dressed before light. He shook Riley awake. On a slip of paper he had written down three addresses.

"If you get in trouble," he said, "write to all three of 'em. One of 'em will get us. We'll come running."

"All right." Riley pulled on his jeans. "Kehoe?"

"Yeah?"

"Watch your step. And this sheriff in town. He's a big, slow-moving Swede, but he's dangerous."

"All right, kid."

An hour later when Cruz went to the barn, the strange horse was gone. The still falling rain had wiped out any tracks. Without knowing quite why he did it, Cruz picked up a few pieces of mud that had fallen from the horse's hooves. He tossed them out into the yard and threw some fresh straw on the ground in the stall.

Cruz had his own brand of loyalty. He rode for his brand, but even more for the man who owned it. And there had been a time, long ago and below the Border—Well, who can say what a man will not do in his youth.

THE FIRST intimation that all was not well for Riley Branam came from Peggy Oliver. Even though she had never met Riley, before this when she'd seen him she had always been inclined to flirt. Now she looked at him with wide eyes, then quickly turned away when their eyes met. At the bank, too, there was a coolness which had never been manifest before.

Riley was at a loss to explain the change, but it soon became apparent elsewhere. People would accept his money for what he wanted, but no conversation accompanied the transaction.

When Riley reached town one morning, Sheriff Larsen stopped him on the street. The Swede was a huge man, and he seemed vaguely lost now.

"You buying cows yet?" he asked.

Riley nodded. "Whiteface or mixed, when I can get 'em."

"Didn't think that there was many around?"

"There isn't."

"Got bills of sale?"

Riley Branam looked at him sharply. "Of course. What are you getting at?"

"Do you mind if I come out and look 'em over?"

Riley Branam felt his neck getting hot. People were watching. There had been, when the sheriff approached him, a noticeable pause all along the street.

"Any time, Sheriff." Abruptly he walked away, with anger welling up inside of him. What was the matter? What had he done wrong?

And then he saw Desloge.

The outlaw was sitting on a bench in front of Hardcastle's saloon, a shabby, dirty man with a deep-lined face and a low-slung gun.

He looked up, recognition in his eyes, and he closed one slowly.

Further angered, Branam slammed into the saloon.

CHAPTER IV

A Ride for Rescue

AT THE bar Riley Branam ordered a drink, aware suddenly that his carefully built life was in danger. Desloge could make him a hunted man. So could Larsen if the sheriff found out about his past.

Standing down the bar was a stranger with a wide dark face. He wore a calfskin vest and had intensely blue eyes. From Kehoe's description, Riley instantly knew the man. This was Gus Enloe, the gunman who rode with Desloge.

Hardcastle, standing at the bar himself, moved up and leaned close to Riley. "What's this I hear about Shattuck and Oliver? Have they got the sheriff on you?"

"I've heard nothing about it." Branam's lips were stiff. "Why would they bother me?"

Hardcastle shrugged, and after a minute, he moved away. Riley Branam turned his glass in his hand. So it was Shattuck then? And Oliver? He tossed off his drink and walked from the saloon.

"That's him," Hardcastle said to Enloe. "Ever see him before?"

"No, not that I recall. Maybe Desloge has."

Riley Branam stopped on the street in the shade of an awning. He could feel it building around him now. The attitude of the townspeople, Larsen's questions, Hardcastle's comments and now—Desloge.

He felt trapped, lost. Suddenly he realized how much he had come to love the ranch at Lost Mountain. The house was no ordinary ranch house. From the log beginning he had built a long, low adobe house, large enough for a family. He lived in the log section still, but the rest was built, even partly furnished.

He knew the hills now, knew their contours and their peaks and canyons. He knew where the grass was greenest and where his cattle liked to go for shade. He had driven those cattle to his own grass, he had seen their gaunt sides fill out. He was coming to love a land for itself.

He would not be driven off, not by anybody, at any time! Here he had made his start to a new life, here he would take his stand, and if he had to die, it would be on his own land. beside his own house.

Abruptly he walked inside the store. Voices stilled. but he walked directly to the counter. There was a rack on the counter holding a few packages of flower seed. Deliberately he chose several.

Dan Shattuck was standing there, not looking at him. Marie was there also, but she had only then turned to see who had come.

Coolly. Riley Branam tossed the packages on the counter and looked up into the eyes of the storekeper.

"I'll take those," he said. "When a man plans to stay on a place, it should look like a home." He dropped a coin on the counter and picked up the seed. "And I'm staying."

He walked out.

At Tia Morales's Cruz fingered his glass and looked over the table at Pico. "You are my friend, Pico"—Cruz's temper flared—"and if you say Señor Shattuck has lost cattle, then it is so. But if you say Señor Branam has stolen those cattle, then I shall kill you!"

Across the table the two Mexicans looked at each other for a long time, a little with bravery, a little with regret. Then Pico shrugged.

"I do not say it, amigo. I hope it is not true. But I do know—and who else has whiteface cows of such a breed?"

Back up the street near Hardcastle's saloon Strat Spooner watched Riley Branam with half-closed eyes. So far the two men had not crossed paths, yet like two strange bulldogs, they were aware of each other. And each walked quietly and moved easily. Spooner was puzzled. Riley had the look of a man who had been over the trail, yet nobody knew him. Nobody at all.

Desloge waited until dark, then took

the trail out of town. He had waited until he was sure no one had seen him. But two men did see him go. One was Hardcastle, who had been watching him, and the other was Sheriff Larsen.

SO WHEN Desloge took the trail toward Lost Mountain Larsen was following him at a discreet distance until there could be no doubt where the man was going. Going back to his office then, Larsen leafed through circulars until he found a faded one on Desloge. A wanted rustler, suspected stage robber.

It was well after dark when Desloge descended to the ranch. And again it was Cruz who first saw the visitor, only this time the man left his horse in the brush, and this time Cruz saw his face. And he had seen Desloge loitering about town.

Riley Branam had a book in his hands when he heard the knock. The truth was, that while Riley could read, he had never learned to read well. And now he had been struggling with this book, one of four he had found in an abandoned shack in Lonesome Pocket and brought home. The one with which he was struggling was *Plutarch's Lives.*

At the knock, he put it aside and opened the door. Desloge stepped in, grinned, and walked across the room to a chair.

"Like old times, ain't it, Riley?"

Riley Branam sat down. "As far as we're concerned," he said quietly, "there were never any old times. I've seen you only once in my life. I've never talked to you. I don't want to talk to you now."

Desloge's little eyes tightened. 'You will. S'pose I talked to Larsen? Or Dan Shattuck?"

Branam moved so swiftly that Desloge had no chance. Grabbing the man by the collar Riley jerked him to his toes. He slapped him three times across the face, then threw him to the floor.

"You ever say a word about me, here or anywhere," he said, still quietly, "and I'll kill you."

Desloge got up slowly. Nothing had gone the way he planned. He had no stomach for night raids on cattle. A man could get killed that way. It had seemed simple, what he had planned. He had meant to suggest to Branam that for a thousand dollars he would ride out of the country, and then he'd meant to go to El Paso or even to Fort Worth. With a thousand dollars a man could do a lot.

Shaken, he brushed off his clothes. He did not even think of reaching for a gun. It was like him that he did not.

"All I wanted"—his voice shook a little, and he could taste blood from a split lip—"was a roadstake. Say a hundred dollars?"

Those slaps had taken something out of Desloge. It had taken nine hundred dollars worth of confidence out of him.

"Ride out like you rode in," Riley Branam told him, "and be glad you're able."

Desloge walked from the house, and Cruz saw him go. He saw him go because not three minutes before another man had appeared in the bunkhouse door—a hard-faced man with white hair. Darby Lewis had looked up from his bunk, startled.

"Get up," the man had said to them, and watch the boss's door. You'll want to be able to swear that a man left the house, and what he looked like. And you'll swear to nothing else, understand?"

And then the man had been gone, and neither cowhand could say who he was. Although for the first time since knowing Riley Branam, Cruz had an idea what he might be.

The two men sat in the doorway in the darkness, and they saw Desloge come out of the house, his face plain in the light. They saw him walk into the brush after his horse. They heard the horse's receding hoofbeats.

Forty-two minutes and some seconds later, Desloge slowed his running horse and walked him down a slope near a towering butte. The moon was out and the light lay white upon the sagebrush flats. Emerging from the shadow of the butte he was thinking how weird were the shadows of the mesquite, how like a horseman one shadow was—and then he

stopped his horse. It was a horseman.

He knew the rider. A man with white hair and a seamed, brown face. And in that instant, Desloge knew he was going to die.

"Couldn't let him live honest, could you?" The man's voice was quiet, without anger. "Your kind never can. He put the fear into you, so you'd go away, but sooner or later, you'd talk too much. You'd spoil something fine."

DESLOGE could not speak. Once he tried to, and then he knew, with startling clarity, that if he denied the man's statement he would be lying, and right now, he felt, was not a time to lie.

"I'll ride," he said. "I won't even stop for my warbag. I'll keep going."

The man in the moonlight ignored his plea. "You've got a gun. You've killed men. So take your chance."

Desloge thought he saw a chance. There was a cloud near the moon. He started to speak, was clearing his throat, when the shadow moved, and he swung his horse toward the rocks of the mesa. At the same time he jerked his gun.

He got it clear, felt a bursting sense of triumph. He brought his gun down—and ran into something in the dark. Something white-hot that went through him and left him floating toward the ground. He hit the ground, felt himself roll over, and when he looked up the cloud was gone from the moon and the light was in his eyes.

And then he was dead. And in the night there was the sound of a horse trotting, and somewhere, over the mesa's rim, a wolf howled to the moon. . . .

It was the night of the Oliver party at the Lazy O, and there was dancing. Pico, in a brocaded Spanish jacket and a red sash, loitered near the gate. He was listening to the talk of a group of men nearby.

One of them, Bud Oliver, had been saying there was only one thing to do. If Larsen did not act, they would. There had been no rustling around here for years until this Branam had come in. Now a rancher named Eustis agreed, more quietly. Bigelow, another, was hesitant, half-convinced. Dan Shattuck hesitated, too. On principle, he was against mob law, against violence.

"I can feel it coming," Oliver was saying. "I can smell trouble. And I ask you, who is he? Where did he come from? Where did he ever work? Where did he get the money he spends?"

"If we move against him," Bigelow said, "there'll be bloodshed. He has two men besides himself."

"Lewis won't stick," Oliver said impatiently. "Nor will Cruz. They both know us."

Pico shifted his shoulders against the wall. He rarely talked. "Cruz will fight," he said. "He will die, if need be. He has told me so."

"Then we'll hang Cruz along with him," Oliver said harshly. "I've lost three hundred head in two months."

"To hang Cruz will not be easy," Pico said, "nor to hang Riley Branam. Branam is a dangerous man, more dangerous than any man here. He will die very hard, and many will go before him."

"I'll gamble on it," Oliver said shortly.

He was a hard-headed man, but Dan Shattuck looked thoughtfully at Pico. The Mexican was no fool. He had an uncanny judgment of men.

There was a stir at the door and, looking up they saw Sheriff Larsen.

"Branam," he said. "Is he here?"

Oliver's head came around sharply. "Did you think he would be?"

Larsen glanced once at Marie, and she felt herself flush.

"I thought he might be," the sheriff said.

"What's the matter?" someone asked.

"Feller named Desloge. He is dead—killed about an hour ago out by the buttes."

"Branam!" Oliver exclaimed with satisfaction. "By the Lord Harry, we've got him! Want a posse, Sheriff?"

Larsen looked around the room. "Come if you like," he said. "I don't think there'll be any trouble."

As the men went to get their horses there was another horse being led off into the dark, and only one man saw it go. Pico, who had followed Marie into the darkness, watched her mount and ride away. He turned and went back for his own horse then, for he must ride with the posse.

His thoughts turned to girl on the racing mare.

He told himself, It is good to be young and in love. Like my own daughter, she is, and I was afraid it would not come for her. The joy, and the hurt.

THE MARE ran, then trotted, then walked, trotted and ran. Riley Branam heard the racing horses on the trail and was waiting in the doorway when she rode up.

"Riley," she asked swiftly as he looked up at her in the moonlight, "did you kill Desloge?"

"No."

"They are coming for you! Sheriff Larsen and the ranchers."

"All right."

She was impatient. "You must get away! They'll not believe you!"

"This is my home. I'll stay." He looked at the mare. "Go inside and keep out of sight. I'll put the mare in the stable."

She hesitated, then dismounted, went inside, and stopped short, rather startled. She knew how cowhands usually lived, yet this room was neat, even painfully clean. She saw a door beyond and walked on, carrying a candle. The home was in Spanish style, cool, comfortable, pleasant. In the daylight one window would look toward the red mountains over the canyons to the north, another would look into blue distance across the sage flats.

She was drinking coffee when he came back into the house and took down his gunbelts. They were much worn. He strapped them on.

"I haven't thanked you," he said and, surprisingly, he took her by the shoulders.

She came out of her chair, not resisting, filled with a sort of startled wonder.

"When this is over," he said, "I want you here—always."

He stepped out into the moonlight then, and was standing there when the posse rode into the yard.

"Late riding, Sheriff," he said quietly. "And you're in good company. Or are you?"

"We want you for killing Desloge!" Oliver's voice was loud. "Drop them gunbelts!"

"Take it easy!" Larsen's voice was stern. "I talk here."

CHAPTER V

The Hunted

DAN SHATTUCK looked at the tall young man who waited quietly before his accusers and, despite himself, the older rancher could not but admire Riley Branam. There was no bravado in the young rancher; only a sort of calm certainty. Shattuck saw a shadow against a curtain inside the house, and his eyes suddenly flickered. Then his gaze went back to Riley.

"You seen Desloge tonight?" Larsen asked Branam.

"He was here," Riley said.

"What for?"

"My business."

"It's my business now." Larsen's voice was only faintly accented. "He's been killed."

"I didn't do it."

Oliver started to interrupt, but Larsen lifted a hand. He had opened his mouth to speak again when Cruz moved in from the darkness and ranged himself beside Riley. Speaking quietly, Cruz told them about Desloge leaving, about the man who had told him and Darby Lewis to watch for that.

"A lie!" Oliver burst out.

Cruz looked at him. "At another time,

señor," he said, "you will apologize for that. I do not lie."

"He's right." Darby Lewis had come up. "The feller was nobody I ever saw before. Didn't get a good look at his face. Sort of square-chinned. He was"—Lewis was emphatic now—"nobody to mess with."

Sheriff Larsen believed them; Riley could see that. Shattuck's face was stiff and cold. Nobody could tell what he believed, yet instinctively Riley knew that Larsen was the leader here, could sway the minds of all of them.

"One question." Larsen paused a moment. "Had you ever seen Desloge before? Did you know him?"

No change came to Riley Branam's face. Inside the house, Marie leaned close to the window, listening.

"Yes." Riley said, "I saw him once before. Only once. And I knew he was a horse thief and a rustler."

"All right." Larsen swung his horse. "Gentlemen, we go to town."

When the last of their horses had trooped away, Riley Branam returned to the house. For an instant he faced Marie across the room. Her face was still now, her gray eyes quiet.

"What you said before they came," she asked. "Did you mean that?"

Miserably he knew he'd had no right to say what he had said, yet it was what he had wished to say, and in the stress of the moment, he had said it. Now, remembering Jim Colburn and the outfit—

He hesitated, saw her face stiffen. She started by him for the door.

"Wait a minute!" he begged. "Let me answer."

At the door she did stop. "You didn't mean it." she said. "You—"

"I meant it," he protested, "but I've no right—"

Marie went out the door then, and she did not stop nor look back. He saw Cruz holding her horse for her, but he made no move to prevent her going. How could he ask a girl to share this with him? A ranch half owned by his outlaw friends, who had given him his chance, and to whom he owed first loyalty?

Even tonight one of them had killed to protect him, and to protect this that in part belonged to them.

A time would come when, wounded and driven, they would need his help. Or if not, when too old to ride they would at last give up and come in. Or until the law had them—or death. What they had given him was no small thing. A chance, even if a chance founded upon stolen money.

He walked back into the house, undressed and fell into bed, blowing out the lamp almost as an afterthought. . . .

Dan Shattuck said nothing to Marie on her return. That she had suffered a shock, he could see, yet from her own reactions he deduced it was a mental shock, or emotional.

His herd had dwindled, some of his prize cattle were gone, but he made no move to start a further investigation. Bud Oliver was ranting. Eustis and Bigelow were with him all the way now. And again their target was Riley Branam.

MARIE still rode out, taking long rides across the mesas and along the rims and canyons, with the wind in her face and her hair blowing. Occasionally, she saw the tracks of riders. Once, near Bear Sign Canyon, she drew up suddenly.

In the bottom of the canyon was a fire, and four horses were picketed nearby. She could see only three men until, circling, she saw a fourth. He lay on blankets under an overhang of rock. She watched for a long time, knowing that the man was very ill.

She knew it more truly when she heard a voice raised stridently:

"No matter what he wants! He'll die here! I say, take him to the kid's place!"

She heard no more, but when a horseman left Bear Sign, she was following, keeping out of sight. The rider circled, did all he could to cover his trail, then hit the main road and followed it until

he could enter the brakes near Lost Mountain. When she saw him again he had dismounted in the cover of the trees.

Evidently he gave some signal, for she saw Riley come to the door and stretch, then saunter carelessly toward the trees. Twice he stopped, but there was no one around the home place. Then he disappeared into the trees.

Thoughtfully, Marie rode slowly back toward the Running S.

Sheriff Larsen was at the dinner table with her father when she came in. She heard him say:

"One of them wounded, anyway. But they got clean off again. I reckon it was the Colburn bunch."

To her question, Larsen replied, "Four men try holdup at Casner Station. They take some money, but in the shooting, one outlaw is wounded, we think. He was carried off by the others."

She said nothing at all of her discovery, yet all night she thought of the wounded man. From what the sheriff had said, the man must have been shot at least three days before. Yet they dared not call a doctor. To have done that would have been an open invitation to capture.

In the morning Dan Shattuck had ridden away with Pico when suddenly Marie began to recall things she had almost forgotten. What had Riley tried to say to her? He had said, "I meant it. I've no right—" And then she had cut him off. Suppose he was an outlaw, like the others!

Yet he had not ridden with outlaws lately. There had been no time. Still, that would explain the source of the money with which he had started his ranch!

He did love her then, but he would not speak because of what lay behind him! And perhaps because of others to whom he so obviously owed loyalty, for some reason.

Suddenly her mind was made up. A man was dying out there, and what Dr. McNary would not do for a man like that he might do for her . . . !

Strat Spooner had struck a hot trail and followed it. In remote Bear Sign Canyon he found where several men had camped. Satisfaction lighted his face. Here was something for him, even if things weren't shaping up around Rimrock and Hardcastle could not make up his mind to anything.

Without doubt this was the trail of the Colburn gang! And rewards for their capture were rich and large.

He struck off, following their trail. Carrying the wounded man, they had stopped often. But when he reached the trail at Lost Mountain he knew for certain where they had gone. He was turning his horse toward Rimrock when he saw Valentz.

"You know what I know?" Valentz called to him.

Strat nodded. "Let's go! We'll get the boys and round this bunch up . . ."

HARDCASTLE sat alone in his office after Strat Spooner had been there and gone. Spooner had told him of the Colburn gang holed up at Lost Mountain, and for a moment he had felt a sudden glow of triumph. He had been waiting for such a break, had known it would come. He had given Spooner his assent to capture the bunch, and Spooner had rushed off eagerly.

There would be an attack, perhaps capture of the Colburn gang. That was of little importance — to Martin Hardcastle. What was important was that there would be shooting. And as long as there were known bandits in the country they would be blamed for whatever happened.

He called a half-witted Mexican boy and gave him a message for Dan Shattuck.

Sheriff Larsen also sat alone in his office, and also thought. He thought slowly and carefully, as always. Each bit of information he had gleaned was pondered and examined, then reexamined. For a long time he had been gathering information, but then Larsen was more than usually aware of his duties

and responsibilities. He was more than a sheriff in this remote section. He'd had to be judge and jury as well on more than one occasion.

Desloge had been known to him by name and record. He'd had no reason to move against Desloge, so he had not. Larsen was not a bigoted man, and he knew his West. The law was so elastic in this country where he officiated that he knew of more than one man who had stretched the law a point or two. Big cattlemen held range that belonged to the Government, but they used it to the best advantage. It might not always be legal, but it was right from a Western point of view.

Desloge was dead now, and despite the fuming of Oliver, Larsen believed the story of Cruz and Darby Lewis. It fitted with what else he knew. And the death of Desloge was no loss, here or anywhere else.

On his desk lay a sheaf of papers—reports on crimes attributed to the Colburn gang. For several years they had operated as a tight unit of four men. They had been swift, efficient, dangerous. In that time they had killed only two men, both of them officers of the law, men who had accepted the risk of death with their jobs.

For a time there had been five members of the gang—the fifth member no more than a boy.

The time this boy had joined the outlaw bunch coincided with the disappearance of young Riley Branam from his old stamping grounds. Larsen had made discreet inquiries. Aside from skill with a gun, which he rarely used, Branam had been a hard-working, serious boy. He came of a good family.

Larsen heaved his big body around in the chair and helped himself to a healthy pinch of Copenhagen. He rolled it under his lip and looked out at the dusty street. There were a dozen saddled horses in front of Hardcastle's. More than usual at the hour.

He turned back to his thoughts. Lately there had again been but four members of the Colburn gang—and Branam had taken up ranching at Lost Mountain. Almost a year had gone by since he had made his first deposit in the bank across the street. Larsen had crossed and recrossed the Lost Mountain range, and he was a man who understood work and the cattle business. Riley Branam was working hard, using his head.

Martin Hardcastle would have been surprised to know that Sheriff Larsen knew of that humiliating visit of his to Dan Shattuck. He would have been further surprised to know that Larsen, without leaving his battered old desk, had figured out the reason behind it.

It had not been difficult. Hardcastle was not in the cattle business. Shattuck rarely ever patronized Hardcastle's saloon. The two men did not meet socially. But many times Hardcastle must have stood on the steps of his saloon and watched Marie Veyre ride by—and Larsen was no fool.

Hardcastle, Larsen knew, was an egotist, and he was arrogant. On that memorable day when the man had driven to the Shattuck ranch, the sheriff had seen him take out the buckboard, had noticed the dark suit. He'd had a good idea where the saloonman had been going, and had foreseen the result.

This was not, at the moment, any of Larsen's business as sheriff, but it could become his business. And, knowing Hardcastle, Larsen was sure it would.

CHAPTER VI

Owlhoot Posse

KEHOE was sitting on the steps of Riley's ranch house when Cruz rode into the yard. The Mexican reined his horse around and jerked his head toward the trail.

"Marie Veyre is coming, with the doctor!"

Kehoe got up swiftly. Riley came to the door. He wore a dark red shirt this morning, jeans, and both guns. "You sure?" he asked Cruz.

Cruz nodded. "She was up in the hills last night about sundown." He paused. "Her mare was near Bear Sign, too, before that."

Riley Branam's eyes sought the hills, but he was not looking at them. He was thinking of Marie, of her face when she had left him, of her sudden hurt when his reply had been hesitant. Now she was bringing help. Or was she?

When she did ride into the yard with the doctor, Riley Branam was alone on the steps.

"Lucky you should show up, Doc," he said quietly. "I've got a wounded cowhand."

Dr. McNary's cool eyes appraised the young rancher. "I'll look at him," he said.

He walked past Riley, entered the ranch house and went on to the room where the wounded man lay. He took the man's wrist for a moment, then unbound the wound.

He looked up sharply. "Did you get the bullet out?"

"We—I mean I was afraid to tackle it."

"Got to come out. Marie, you can help me. . . ."

An hour later he came to the door and rolled down his sleeves. "He's got a chance, but only a chance."

Marie came to the door and stood beside Riley. Her face was white and drawn. Riley took her arm but said nothing, listening to McNary.

"He's tough. I've given up trying to figure the chances of some of these men. They live in spite of everything." He glanced toward the corral where Kehoe was rubbing down a horse. "Taking on some new hands, I see." His voice was casual. "Soon be roundup time."

Marie mounted her horse when McNary got ready to leave.

"Be careful, Riley," she said, but did not look at him. "Sheriff Larsen would know these men."

"Marie"—Riley reached up and took her hand, forced her to meet his eyes—"I'm honest."

"I believe you," she said quietly.

Her fingers tightened on his hand, and then she was riding away.

Jim Colburn came from the bunkhouse with Parrish. It was Weaver who lay on the bunk inside, fighting for life. Colburn's face was brown, seamed with sun and wind, and his hair was white, although he was only a few years past forty.

"Like that girl, kid?"

"Yes," Riley said. "More than I would have believed."

"That's good. A man should have a wife. She's the salt of the earth." Colburn threw down his cigarette. "Look, kid. I know how you feel, but you were never an outlaw. Sure, you rode with us, you helped us, you profited from it. But your heart wasn't in it. He"—he nodded toward the house to indicate the wounded man—"saw it plain. Several of these cattlemen here were plenty careless with an iron when they first started out. You've quit, you've showed this past year that you had it in you, so don't let what happened keep you away from that girl. She'd be lucky to get you."

He hitched up his belts and prepared to turn away.

"When the fever's out of Weaver," he said, "let him rest awhile. We're drifting."

Riley shook his head. "No, Jim," he said. "If you go, I go with you."

Colburn's face hardened. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're not leaving." Riley Branam put a hand on the door jamb. "Look, Jim. Weaver's fighting it out now. He's lucky to have the chance. Parrish had a narrow escape just awhile back. The odds are against you now. You know it, you all know it."

"So then?"

RILEY said, "McNary said he saw I was taking on some new hands. That gave me an idea. I'll need hands

to work the stock. We've got only a few hundred head now, but I've made a deal to buy five hundred head of mixed stuff. It will have to be branded. You've got a first class Morgan stallion there. There's some mountain meadows with thousands of acres that could make the greatest horse pasture in the world and could be fenced by closing two draws. I figure we can raise some saddle stock. What I mean is, you've ridden your last trail. You boys stay here, where you belong."

Jim Colburn hesitated, his face working. His eyes strayed over the hills, then down to the long sagebrush flats. He rubbed his palms down over his jeans. It would be a good thing to rest quiet, a good thing to have friends again, to sit in the sun and smoke, to smell the branding fires and handle the irons.

Kehoe ran his hand over the flank of his horse. Its hide was hot in the sun. The horse stamped a hoof, switching a tail at the flies.

"I think the kid's right, Jim," Kehoe said.

Colburn turned his head. "Parrish?"

"I never want to hear another owl hoot, Jim."

Colburn nodded. It was right and good. Times were changing. It had taken rough men to tame the West, and some of them had become wild themselves in the process, but only a fool will not learn. He had taken money with a gun—now he could pay for it with hard work and a building hand.

It was one of the reasons they had always held so tightly together, because each, in his own mind, knew the others were the same. They had been wild cowboys when they were younger; now they were men, and it was time to draw a line.

"All right, kid," Colburn said quietly. "We're workin' for you. . . ."

Four miles away beside Dry Creek, Strat Spooner drew up his horse and lifted a hand. Behind him eighteen tough gun-hands, including Gus Enloe and Valentz, swung their horses in toward the creek and stopped.

"Take a rest." Spooner swung from the saddle. "When we go in, we'll go fast. There'll be four or five men there, and that one in bed. Shoot to kill." He grinned, baring his yellowed teeth. "This time the law's with us."

Squatting down on the bank of Dry Creek he went on, "They won't be expecting us, so it should be a cinch. Gus" —he looked up at the gunman in the calfhide vest—"circle and come down from behind the house. Throw a couple of rounds into the bunkhouse door for luck, shoot into the windows of the house, then sweep by the stables. Take six men with you.

"Nick, you take four men and come down the draw to cut off any escape to Lost Mountain. I'll take the rest and come right up from the valley. We'll ride slow until we're right in sight, then take it through fast. In that first swoop, shoot anybody that ain't on a horse."

Spooner lit a cigarette and grinned past it, his hard-boned face shining a little with sweat.

"It may not take more'n five minutes," he said then, and looked up at the gunman again. "Gus, soon's the shooting is over, you take your boys and those Nick has, round up all that beef and start it back up the draw. There's a narrow trail goes over Buck Ridge. Just get those cows over it and keep 'em moving into Lonesome Pocket. Hole up there and wait."

Valentz chuckled. "Now, Strat, that there's what I call figuring!"

Spooner got up and dropped his cigarette, grinding it out with a toe. "All right, boys. Move out. When we rush the place, come on in—*fast!*"

DAN SHATTUCK crossed Dry Creek not three miles below the assembly point of the Spooner gang. He drew up there, staring toward a dust cloud ahead.

"Cattle," he muttered. "Quite a bunch to make that much dust."

Nevertheless, he rode on. In his pocket was a printed note:

If you want evidence—ten head of Running S steers are penned up behind Sugarloaf—they are fresh branded to 5 B.

The note was unsigned, but 5 B was the Branam brand, and Dan Shattuck's face was stiff as he rode. Eager as he was to apprehend the rustlers in the Rimrock country, he feared to discover that Riley Branam was actually the rustler, for that Marie was in love with Riley was obvious.

Yet, little as the evidence might be, the finger pointed at Branam. Despite Shattuck's suspicions, he had not failed to observe the hard work Branam had applied to the Lost Mountain ranch. And rustlers did not like to work.

Crossing Dry Creek, he looked north, watching the dust cloud as he cut through the sagebrush levels. A gleam of sunlight on metal brought a pucker to his brow. That looked like a flash from a rifle.

But who would be moving in such force?

The three-hundred-foot hump of the Sugarloaf loomed ahead of him, and he worked his way through the greasewood and rounded the mountain. The corral was there, but empty. When he rode up to it, the bars were down and there was no sign that cattle had even grazed here in months.

He got down from his horse and walked around, scowling thoughtfully. And then he stopped.

Martin Hardcastle stepped down from a clump of rocks and brush, and in his hand he held a gun.

"You were mighty hard on me, Shattuck." Newcastle's triumph was thick in his throat. "Now I'm going to kill you! And I'll never be suspected. Larsen will lay it to that outlaw kid, Branam."

Yet there was one thing happening upon which Hardcastle had not counted. That was the fact that the half-witted Mexican boy, known as Chata because of his flat nose, had a hero.

Chata lived in abject fear of Hardcastle, and obeyed his every demand. In return, Newcastle fed him, gave him a corner of the stable in which to sleep, and tolerated him. Chata, he knew, did not talk. Chata kept his secrets inviolate. It might have been better—for him—if Chata had talked a little, but the Mexican had never spoken of his hero.

That idol, whom Chata worshiped, was a man of his own people. He was that bulldogger and roper, that tophand and hunter that skillful Pico.

And Pico, riding in from the southwest, met Chata on the trail. Curious, he asked questions, and Chata was eager to oblige. He had taken a message from Hardcastle to Shattuck.

What message? He did not know. He could not read English. Only one word he knew, and that from the packages and sacks in the store. It was "Sugar," with a big "S."

Pico thought quickly. He was remembering Hardcastle's wanting to marry Marie, and Shattuck's scornful reply. Pico had never believed that would end it. Now a message. What message?

Was the note signed? This Chata knew. He knew what a signature was, and he knew Hardcastle's signature. It had not been.

A trap—and a perfect time for a trap! Pico had a conniving brain of his own, and he thought he saw—

But Sugar—

Pico clapped Chata on the shoulder. "You're a good man, Chata," he said, and started to ride on.

Chata was pleased. A compliment from his idol was like a benediction. If this news pleased Pico, maybe if he told more—

"They are all riding," he said. "They are to kill everybody at Lost Mountain."

A few questions and answers. Pico saw it clearly now. Under cover of the attack on the 5 B, he saw the murder of Dan Shattuck.

"Chata," Pico said swiftly, "ride fast! To the sheriff. Tell him what you have told me. Tell him it must be Sugarloaf, and I'm going there."

Pico had never been known to spur a horse. He spurred one now.

CHAPTER VII

Raid on the 5 B

AT LOST MOUNTAIN Weaver was conscious and resting easily. His fever seemed to be broken, and he looked around at the house and grinned weakly at Riley.

"Looks like I figured right, kid."

Riley nodded. "You boys took care of me. Now I'll take care of you."

Kehoe's saturnine face appeared in the door. "Riley, crowd coming."

Riley Branam turned swiftly. A bunch of men could mean nothing but trouble. He stepped to the door, lifting his field-glasses from the hook as he moved. He adjusted them. Through the dust he could see the glint of sunlight on rifles. There was a smaller cloud of dust further north.

"Trouble," he said swiftly. "Get inside and load up. There's three rifles and an express gun."

Riley ran for the bunkhouse. At his yell, Colburn appeared in the door. "Cruz to the house!" Riley said quickly. "Jim, you stick here with Parrish. If it's fight they want, they'll get it!"

Darby Lewis was coming down the draw when he saw the horsemen ahead of him. He had quit the 5 B, then had changed his mind and started back. He drew up, watching.

He knew these riders. He had himself rustled cattle with some of them. He had never liked Nick Valentz, and watching him now, Darby Lewis knew suddenly the time had come for him to take a stand.

It was a strange decision, for Darby was a drifter with the currents. He had always taken the line of least resistance. Now, suddenly, his way was clear for the first time he could remember, and he knew what it meant to ride for a brand.

He knew a sneak attack when he saw one, too. He shucked his rifle from the scabbard, glanced toward a mountain trail that offered an escape. And then he fired.

It was a deliberate miss. He could not shoot a man in the back.

Valentz whirled, his fury at being discovered twisting his face. His gun swung up and Lewis fired again. A man near Valentz cried out and swung. Lewis fired once more, felt something smash into him, then he was racing for the rocks. Four rifles blasted, and he felt the smash of bullets. With a shock he realized he'd copped it good. He stopped his horse and swung from saddle.

He fell into the rocks, rolled over and shot twice into an oncoming rider. The man went backwards from his saddle, dead before he hit the ground, but not before Darby was dead.

Darby had quit, and it would take the buzzards to tell the survivors at Lost Mountain that he had returned.

At the shots, Strat Spooner swore and slammed the spurs into his mount. Gus Enloe yelled, and the three groups of horsemen converged.

They swept down upon five seasoned fighters with waiting rifles. But they swept down upon a strongly built house, a fortresslike bunkhouse, and a rambling gloomy stable in which Riley had decided to make his stand. He was on the roof. It was an adobe barn with a parapet around the roof and several loop-holes.

Colburn heard them coming but his eyes were on the trees back of the house.

"Up there," he said to Parrish. "You take those on the left, I'll take the right."

Riders burst from the trees and Colburn shot. His .44-40 took a yelling man in the throat, choking the yell off sharply. A horse stumbled and fell, the rider scrambled up, and Parrish quickly dropped him.

Spooner and his riders swept through, united with the others, and swept on into the canyon where Darby Lewis had died.

Their surprise had failed. They had seen no enemies but Darby, whom they had killed. They had lost four men, and two others were wounded.

RILEY had not fired at all. He held his fire. knowing the longer he kept his position undiscovered, the better. He heard glass crash in the house, heard the heavy boom of a buffalo gun, and knew that Spooner would not try another such rush. From now on it would be tougher. It would be moving, sniping, seeking out targets.

Riley kept down and watched. Twice he saw moving men, crawling for position. He held his fire, studying the situation. He chose three possible targets, drew a bead on each, swinging rapidly from one to the other.

He made three dry runs, then settled down.

A gun thundered and again glass crashed. Then a volley, all shots concentrated on the house. One of Riley's targets was a man in a checked shirt. He lifted himself to his knees, invisible from the house or bunkhouse and drew a bead on the house. And Riley shot him, saw his hands fly up, heard the rattle of the rifle on the rocks, and was already firing at a second man, then a third.

He hunkered down, looked again. The man in the checkered shirt lay sprawled on blood-stained rocks, checked out. His second shot had been a clean miss, the third a scratch—or maybe more.

Moving along the roof, Riley studied the situation with care. Short of a ricochet or carelessness, his own friends were securely intrenched, although without the mobility that he possessed. He had an idea that more than one of the Spooner outfit was already wishing he was far away from there.

He had seen Spooner, and he had seen Nick Valentz. Spooner had moved off among the trees, but Valentz and two men were working down toward the rear of the house, which would put them out of sight for him.

He chanced a quick shot, missed, and rolled along the roof as bullets knocked dust from adobe bricks where he had been. He felt the itch of adobe dust on his neck, and went to the trap and lowered himself from the roof into the hay loft.

He saw the man as the man saw him, and swung the rifle, firing from the hip. Their bullets crossed in flight. The man in the doorway missed. Riley did not. He dropped behind baled hay and got three bullets into the woods at a hidden marksman.

A man darted for a window, and a gun roared from the bunkhouse and the man dropped out there. He started to lift his gun and when bullets dusted him on both sides he lay still.

They did not like it. There were gun-hardened men in the lot, but there also were loafers and saddle-bums with no taste for fighting. From somewhere, Riley heard the diminishing hoofbeats of a horse. Of two horses. Somebody had had enough.

Kehoe appeared suddenly, outside the house. He glanced toward the barn, lifted a hand, then waited, gun poised. Apparently he could hear something or see something beyond the corner of the corral. Then Riley saw them see each other —the man was Nick Valentz. Kehoe had said he knew him.

Valentz fired and missed. Kehoe shot, then shot again, and put in a finishing shot as Valentz folded.

Silence descended and hung heavily. Off in the hills, thunder rolled and rumbled with a boom that sounded like rolling barrels down a stone corridor.

Riley Branam knew how the raiders felt. The surprise had failed, and this was no quick, slashing attack and victory. It had settled down to a deadly duel between seasoned fighting men, all dead shots, and a scattering of renegades.

More horses galloped away, and now there was only an occasional defiant shot. Working as a team, Kehoe and Riley went into the woods. The remaining men began to withdraw. There was an exchange of shots, then it was over, with a drum beat of hooves.

Of the nineteen men in all who had attacked, seven were dead.

GUS ENLOE thought Spooner must be dead, because he had not seen him for some time. It was Gus, his calf-skin vest still intact, who led the shattered remnants back to Rimrock. There were only seven to lead, and two of them were wounded, one barely able to sit his saddle.

Strat Spooner was not dead. He was halfway to the Running S, and riding with care.

He had realized before any of them that they had failed, and that there would be repercussions. Larsen was not a man to accept any excuse a mob could give him for taking the law into their own hands—and such a mob. It would be the same with him, no matter who the victims were to have been.

And Spooner was thinking of Marie Veyre. He had been thinking of her most of the day. There would be nobody at the ranch but the girl and the cook. Maybe Shattuck, but he would not be able to stop Strat Spooner. And Strat had made up his mind to leave the country anyway.

He came down the bench above Beaver Head and scanned the ranch. Horses in the corral, none saddled. No sound, no movement. He took the trail, working his way down.

The cook, a man with a bad limp, came to the door and threw out some water. He did not look in Spooner's direction.

Strat drew up and rolled a smoke while he studied the place. Shattuck always kept a horse saddled for riding, but none was in sight now. Therefore he must be gone.

He heard the piano being played in the house, and his tight-skinned face twisted in a slight smile as he walked his horse out of the greasewood and mesquite and rode into the yard. He swung down and walked lazily up to the door.

Glancing into the bunkhouse as he passed, he had seen nobody. Only the cook was here then—and Marie.

He took his time, drawing deep on his smoke. The music continued. Strat Spooner walked up to the kitchen door and pushed it open. . . .

Elsewhere things had happened and were happening. Martin Hardcastle had not talked long. He had taken his moment of gloating, and Dan Shattuck had made his try. It had failed.

Hardcastle had shot twice. His first shot scored but the second missed. This Hardcastle had not known. Shattuck had fallen. Walking over to him, Hardcastle had looked down and smiled.

"You ain't dead yet, but you will be. I want you to take it slow. There ain't nobody, mavbe for months, going to come over here. So just lie there and die slow."

He had gone to his horse and swung up, then lazily walked the horse back.

"Buzzards pretty quick," he said, "before you die. You think about turning me off like you done."

Hardcastle had swung his horse and walked it away. When he reached the base of Sugarloaf, he'd glanced back. It would be his last chance for a sight of the man he had shot.

It was his last chance for a lot of things, for when he looked around again he saw a rider. It was Pico!

Hardcastle did not carry a rifle and it was too far for a pistol shot. He wheeled his horse and tried to make a run for it.

Pico got down from his own saddle. Resting his rifle in a notch on a rock, he took careful aim, held his breath, saw the sights darken with Hardcastle's back, and squeezed off his shot.

The heavy slug nicked Hardcastle's spine, glanced up and tore through his neck muscles, breaking his collar bone. His horse ran on—riderless.

An hour later, still alive but paralyzed from the hips down, Hardcastle saw the first buzzard in the darkening blue of the sky. It swung above him in a wide, slow circle. And then there were two.

Dan Shattuck had not been dead when Pico got to him. The big Mexican worked swiftly. He built a fire, heated water, bathed the wound. He bandaged it with a poultice made of herbs, an Indian rem-

edy his mother had taught him to make. Then he got Dan into the shade and built a signal fire. . . .

IN THE sickroom in the 5 B ranch house, Weaver turned his head toward the window and listened. Kehoe had gone out during the last of the fighting and when it ended, Cruz had left the room. There was still the acrid smell of gunpowder here. It was an old smell, a familiar smell.

The trail days were ended now, the boys settled. He had known this would come, and he had been right about the kid. Maybe when his sins and failures were totaled, this would count for something. Weaver lifted himself on his elbow and looked out the window, broken by rifle shots. The air was cool. It felt good on his face, fresh with the smell of pines.

Weaver knew at that minute that he was going to die.

He had been feeling better, had been looking around. He had enjoyed the sound of the guns. He had lived to that sound, he could die by it. He would have liked to have had one shot, but was too weak.

There was something yet to do. He pulled over a piece of brown paper sacking, and wrote painfully:

> Last Will & Testimint of Ira Weaver. Everything to the kid, Riley Branam. Hang up your spurs, Jim, Parry and Kehoe I'm lightin a shuck.
>
> Ira Weaver

He laid back on the bed and looked up at the roof.

"Damn it," he said softly, and he smiled. "I got my boots off!" Slightly amazed, and quite pleased, he died.

CHAPTER VIII

Badman's Finish

SHERIFF LARSEN rode into the ranch yard at Lost Mountain and looked around. He glanced at Colburn, then at Parrish. Neither man said a word. Larsen walked by them to look at the body of Nick Valentz, then at the others.

"Goot shooting," he said, and listened to Riley's quiet account of it.

He was with them when they found Weaver, and he went back outside with Riley and Colburn. He walked to his saddle and got up into leather.

"You got goot hands, boy," he told Riley. "Keep them vorking."

He looked past Riley at Jim Colburn.

"Last time I see you I vorked in a store in Dodge," he said. "You rode segundo for the Pierce trail herd. You vas a goot hand." He gathered the reins. "I chudge a man by his actions," he said, and walked his horse away.

Jim Colburn looked after him, and then he said, "Riley, I never thought I'd really *like* a sheriff." He turned. "One last order from your old boss, and then you're the boss. Go see that girl—now!"

Strat Spooner was a careful man and he knew the penalties for molesting a woman. So far as he was aware only the old cook and the girl were on the place. But he meant to be sure. No overt act until he *was* sure.

He could not know it, but he had arrived at the Running S at approximately the same moment Larsen had reached the Lost Mountain place.

He shoved open the kitchen door.

"How's for coffee?" he asked, looking past the cook at the open door leading to the front of the house.

Cookie knew Strat Spooner, and he felt a little start of fear. What was the man doing out *here?*

"Sure," he said, and poured coffee, then set out a large slab of apple pie.

He did not like Strat Spooner, and pie was a luxury, yet he wanted to keep the man busy.

Why was he here? The boss was gone, the hands were on the west range, Pico was gone.

The piano music ceased, there was a click of heels on the hall floor, then the door was opened wider and Marie Veyre stepped into the kitchen. She stopped

abruptly on seeing Spooner.

The big gunman's eyes appraised her and he smiled.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said. "Glad to see you looking so well."

Her blouse was tight across her breasts and suddenly again Marie was entirely too conscious of it. She turned to Cookie.

"Uncle Dan will be back soon. You can start supper whenever you like."

"You missed the shooting," Strat told her slowly. He leaned back in his chair. "Fellers raided that Lost Mountain place."

She turned sharply around. Her eyes were large, her face white. Spooner divined the reason. He had seen her talking to Riley Branam.

"He's got fighting friends," Spooner told her. "Never figured he was much hisself. Never seen anybody he buried, but I always figured to have a go at him my own self."

"He would kill you," Marie said, her voice cool.

"I don't figure so." Spooner chuckled. "Glad to know Shattuck ain't here. That was the one thing had me puzzled."

Cookie turned slowly, his tongue touching his lips. There was no gun in the kitchen. He glanced across toward the knives but Spooner was watching him.

Fully aware of what both were thinking, Spooner took his time. He had no idea where Shattuck was, but he did have an idea that it was nowhere close. He had not known Hardcastle's plans, but the saloonkeeper was not as devious as he had believed, and Spooner had believed Hardcastle's plans had something to do with Shattuck.

Marie turned and started back into the front of the house but Strat's voice stopped her.

"Take it easy, Marie." He got to his feet, his hard-boned face lazy, but his eyes were hard and hot. "I ain't through talking."

"Here!" Cookie stepped forward and Strat swung a backhand blow with a heavy crockery coffee cup. The move was swift, Cookie tried to duck, but the blow took him on the temple. He collapsed without a sound.

MARIE ran to him, her face stricken. "You—you've killed him!"

"Maybe." Spooner took a deep drag on the cigarette he had relighted. "I doubt it."

Swiftly he stooped and before Marie could jerk herself away, he caught her arm and pulled her to him. Then with her under one arm, kicking and struggling, he pushed open the door and strode, spurs jingling, into the big hall.

In the living room he dropped her on a divan and stepped back, grinning. "No use to make all this fuss," he said. "It ain't going to do you a mite of good." He flicked the ash from his cigarette and grinned at her. "And you better hope Shattuck don't get home. If he does, I might have to kill him."

"Pico will come!" she said defiantly.

Marie watched him, more frightened. He was so sure of himself, so confident.

"That Mex don't worry me none." Strat crossed the room and picked up a bottle from a serving table and walked back. He took a drink, then handed it to her. "Help yourself. Don't say I ain't generous."

"I don't drink."

He chuckled, enjoying himself. His eyes flickered to the windows. Amused as he might be, he was still a cautious man.

"Have one anyway," he said.

"No!"

The amused smile left his lips and he studied her coldly. "You drink," he said. "You take it now or I'll force it down you."

He shoved the bottle and she took it, then deliberately she struck at him. He jumped back, then in a movement so swift it seemed unbelievable in so big a man, he struck the bottle from her hand and slapped her.

The blow knocked her down, but quickly she scrambled to her feet, her head ringing, and got around the table. He watched her, unhurried. He picked up the fallen bottle and took another drink, then put it down. He made no move to

come around the table after her, but took the near edge and began to draw it toward the wall.

There was no place to go. There was no weapon in the room.

And then she heard a walking horse outside.

Strat Spooner heard it, too. His head came around sharply, and instantly, she screamed:

"Look *out!*"

Spooner swore and lunged to the side of the door, gun in hand. It did not open.

Strat Spooner peered out. A riderless horse stood in the yard. It was Dan Shattuck's horse.

He straightened and laughed, then turned to Marie.

"Honey," he said, "Shattuck ain't coming back. His horse just showed without him."

Marie ran to the window, unmindful of Spooner. Dan Shattuck's gray stood quietly, one rein dangling, the other still looped on the horn.

A floor board creaked and she dodged just in time, for Spooner had been almost upon her. Swiftly she ducked away, throwing a chair in his path. He stopped for another drink, took it, and came on. . . .

Riley Branam saw that riderless horse, too, trotting toward the ranch house. He knew that horse, and instantly divined that Shattuck had been injured or killed. He started to backtrack, but decided to ride on to the ranch to break the news to Marie.

He had almost reached the kitchen door when he saw Spooner's horse! He had seen Spooner riding that horse on the first wild dash through the 5 B yard.

In an instant he was out of saddle. Moving to the kitchen door, he pushed it carefully open and stepped in. Cookie lay on the floor, his hair bloody.

From an inner room came the crash of a chair, then a low laugh. Riley tiptoed to the door, moved into the room. Spooner was facing the girl, half turned toward him.

RILEY moved another step forward. He could see the panic on Marie's face and there arose in him something cold and dangerous.

Never in his life had he felt like this, not even as a boy when—

"Hello, Strat," he said softly.

Marie gasped, and Strat's shoulders bunched as if he'd been struck. The big gunman turned slowly, his face still. He looked at Riley, then beyond him.

Branam was alone.

"Hello, Riley." Spooner knew what he was going to do, and he was smiling now, a cold smile. "Ready to die?"

Spooner took a quick step and stood directly between Riley Branam and Marie! Now Marie was directly in the line of fire.

Yet even as he stepped, Marie had recognized his purpose. As Spooner dropped a hand for a gun, Marie hit the floor. Spooner heard her, but his gun was already swinging up.

Riley Branam felt that coldness inside him, that stillness. He took a step to the left to place Marie still more out of the line of fire, and palmed his gun.

Spooner's first shot burned Riley's neck. Riley winced, then fired. His gun was hip high, his elbow against his hipbone and the gun muzzle turned slightly inward. As the gun bucked in his hand Strat backed up a step. Riley fired a second time, the bullet striking Spooner's gun and, glancing upward, ripped a wide gash in the gunman's throat under the chin.

Spooner blinked his eyes and backed up again. Then he steadied himself and fired twice, holding carefully. Riley Branam felt the bullet hit and felt his leg go out from under him. He heard the next bullet whip by, then he was on the floor and he was numb.

Was this how it felt to die? He looked suddenly into the eyes of Marie and knew he could not die—yet.

He rolled over and pushed himself up, rocking back on his heels. He lifted his gun, which seemed impossibly heavy and saw Strat Spooner still standing there,

his throat and shirt front blotched with blood. Riley could actually see blood flowing from the throat wound. His first bullet had struck Spooner in the stomach and it also was bleeding.

Eyes wild and terrible, Strat Spooner looked down at Riley and brought his own gun up. Both fired. Splinters stung Riley's cheek, and his ear-drum went dead with the crash of the bullet.

Spooner was still standing, though, and he began to walk forward. Riley shot twice into his body, then dropped his gun and dived feebly at the man's legs. Strat came down in a heap his face, turned toward Riley, the face of a living dead man. He grabbed at Riley's throat with huge hands, fingers spread, and Marie screamed.

Riley struck at those rigid fingers, then threw himself back and got to one knee. Spooner tried to get up, also. He got his legs under him, and with the painful precision and carefully calculated effort of a drunken man, tried to straighten up.

He fell back to his knees. Panting hoarsely, gouts of blood coming from his throat, he tried again.

Awe-struck, Riley and Marie saw Spooner slowly push himself erect. He looked carefully around.

"Throwed," he said distinctly, then added a word choked off by blood.

He took two fast steps forward and smashed violently into the wall. He fell then, and rolled over on his side, gradually stretching out to full length. He took two long shuddering breaths then, while Riley and Marie huddled close together.

And then he did not breathe any more and he was dead.

IF YOU should come, in the passing of years, to the sagebrush flats below Lost Mountain, listen to the wind. It might tell a story, and point the way to a graveyard near an abandoned town site.

Rimrock is gone. There's another town thirty miles away. The foundations of Rimrock are left, and some of the graves there are kept up. Ira Weaver is buried there beside Dan Shattuck, who lived to see his second grandchild, and Sheriff Larsen, who died at ninety-two.

Kehoe married Peg Oliver, and they had four sons. One of them was killed in Korea, and one's making movies now about the wild, wild days in the West. Kehoe was elected sheriff when Larsen retired, and Parrish became his deputy.

Parrish was killed, finally, in a bank stickup. Two Chicago boys, one of them with a tommy-gun. They went out together, all three of them. His last words were, "Colburn planned 'em better!"

Colburn lived out his time at Lost Mountain and people often looked him up to ask questions about the bad old days. He answered them, and his mild old eyes were always a little amused because none of them ever asked about his own life. He was such a quiet man.

Mr. and Mrs. Riley Branam fared the best of all, both in material things and happiness. Though they never had any children, they had each other and everything that money, friendship and vast respect could buy. Their love for one another was one of those rare undying affairs, almost legendary now. And even today, should you come unheralded to Lost Mountain, you'd likely catch them holding hands.

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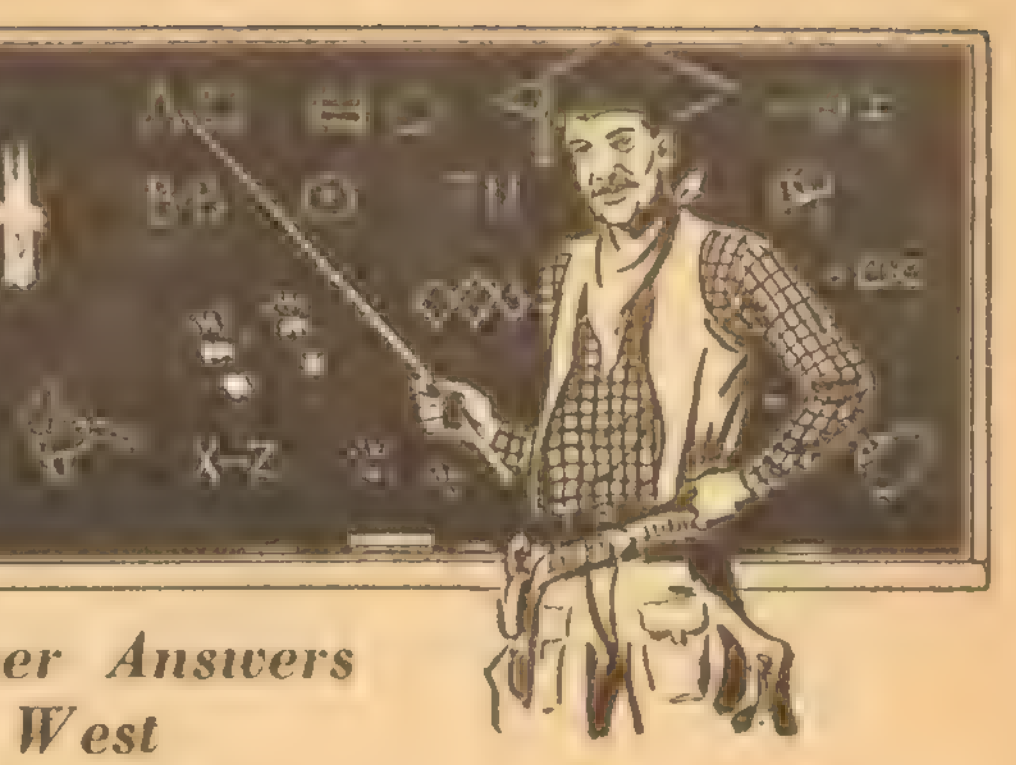

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Is it true that cowboys always have to pay big entrance fees to compete in rodeo contests?—Ernie (N.H.)

A.—Yes, in all sure 'nough rodeos they do. Any time no entrance fee is charged it is not a rodeo but just a wild west show or exhibition. Entrance fees vary in proportion to the amount of prize money and are usually added to the prize money purses. Usually fees run anywhere from $5.00 to $100.00 to enter any single event.

Q.—How do you pronounce "caballo," the Spanish for horse?—D. P. C. (Ark.)

A.—Correct Castilian Spanish pronunciation is kah-BAHL-yo or kah-VAHL-yo, since the "b" and "v" sounds are interchangeable in Spanish. Spanish-Americans here in New Mexico drop the "L" and say kah-BAH-yo or kah-VAH-yo. To the non-Spanish ear this sounds more like kah-VIE-yo, so that's what most cowboys say.

Q.—When and where out west should we go to see real Indian dances?—G. W. T. (Ohio).

A.—I believe tribes in New Mexico and Arizona put on more ceremonial dances to which visitors are admitted than do most of the northern tribes. Some occur in every month of the year, but dates are usually chosen by the *caciques* and medicine men of each tribe in accordance with traditional signs of moon, stars, sun, crop growth, etc. rather than by the calendar. The beautiful and picturesque Green Corn Dance at Santo Domingo, N.M., is usually about August 4th. San Geronimo or harvest dances at Taos, N.M., on September 30th, are worth seeing. Authentic Indian dances by many tribes are performed at the annual Indian Ceremonial at Gallup, N.M., in August. Your best bet is to write to New Mexico Tourist Bureau, Santa Fe, N.M., for specific information and dates. Or to similar bureaus in other western states.

Q.—I have read that rodeo steer wrestling was called bulldogging because the first cowboy who ever did the stunt threw the steer down with his teeth. Is this true? If so, who was the cowboy and how in the dickens did he do it?—E. B. (N.M.).

A.—True. A Texas Negro cowboy named Bill Pickett is credited with originating steer bulldogging in 1903. Pickett made the transfer from the back of a running horse to the head of a running steer, getting a good hold on the steer's horns and bringing him to a stop by digging in his heels the same as rodeo steer wrestlers do today. But instead of twisting the steer down by the horns, Pickett would turn the critter's nose skyward, then sink his teeth in its upper lip or nostril, turn loose all hand holds and yank the steer over with his "bulldog" hold. The extreme tenderness of a steer's upper lip and nostrils was what made this possible. Still it was by no means a simple trick and when other cowboys took up the stunt they preferred to wrestle the steer down by his horns. The only other cowboy I know of who ever bulldogged steers with his teeth was the late Henry Metcalf of Las Vegas, N.M., though probably there have been others. Nowadays most rodeos call this feat of cowboy skill "steer wrestling," though some still bill it as "bulldogging."

Brother Ed

By W. EDMUNDS CLAUSSEN

THEY held the funeral for Ed Lant that afternoon but Frank Lant couldn't make up his mind to go in the church right away. Most of the men had tossed their cigarettes aside and gone up the creaking board steps. Inside the women sat in stillness and let their husbands squirm uncomfortably in their starched collars.

Here inside in the shallow oak box flanked by its sprays

More often than not, the mark of Cain is invisible. . . .

of half-wilted flowers lay death. They had brought wild roses and honeysuckle and ferns from the river, all painstakingly tied by feminine hands with ribbons cut from Sunday sashes. Ed Lant had been deeply loved and he had been too young to die.

Frank Lant hadn't been inside the church for years and he took one final restless turn over the slope. The air was choking under the trees and an empty dread ate into his spine. Somehow his walk carried him out of the yard, into the cemetery. Emily Lant's voice reached him through the window.

"Ed's favorite was always *Nearer My God To Thee.* Please play it now."

Frank couldn't go in there now! Not until Lydia Pringle finished pumping her Beatty organ. No one would think it strange that a man's brother couldn't stand the music in there, and all the women sobbing. What is heaven's name made Ma ask them to play it now?

His eyes skimmed over the graveyard and he saw the crosses leaning awry between the tree shadows, white as bonemeal and already nearly bare of inscriptions. Yonder beneath the red trumpet vines was his brother's grave. The fresh, raw earth caught a last ray of lowering sunlight. How was it the parsons liked to express themselves, about returning clay to clay?

Ed had always been the favorite and already the town was saying if only Frank had been home last night. Frank was the one who liked guns and it might have been different if Frank had braced the hold-up man at the bank. But Frank wouldn't have pulled a boneheaded stunt like that for the bank. Not for somebody else's money.

He tore his glance up block to Deborah's boarding house with its neat picket fence. He leaned forward across the cemetery railing and found his thoughts reaching eagerly after Deborah. She was a girl with full breasts and a white face and hair black as a raven's wing. Since she came to Wagon Grove she'd put on a better show than the opera house had ever seen. Afterwards, late in the night, men began beating a path through that white gate.

As soon as this was over he'd be calling at the house himself. This time she'd let him enter and they'd be going out afterward for a spin. She already knew about the blacks he'd bought, and the carriage. It took money to make a woman heed a man, and he had money now and already the look had changed in her eyes. She'd have a welcome for him tonight and a warm place inside her arms.

He felt a hand brush his arm. Deacon Stowl's voice touched his ear. They called him The Deacon, leaving off his given name, and he was bald and grave and his hushed voice was like a church mouse.

"They want you to be a pall-bearer," the Deacon said. "You'll do that, Frank? Poor Ed."

He nodded, rather than answered with his lips. The muscles behind the Deacon's thin mouth slackened as he led Frank toward the church step. "It's been a blow but you'll have to come inside now. Your mother—he was always Emily's favorite. A hard working, clean, Christian man. You'll have to aspire for his place, Frank."

AGAIN Frank nodded. He was thinking Ed always would remain her favorite in memory. It had been this way too long, and Frank took after his father. Something in the Deacon's eye was talking in the way that struck deeper than his voice. Frank thought, he's thinking if I'd been home last night this might not have happened to Ed. He'd rather that bullet in my gut than Ed's. They'd throw me in the ground without any music.

Go ahead and say it, Deacon. This brother has been gambling and chasing after women. The people inside aren't quite certain if he'll bring along an atmosphere of iniquity when he takes his seat in the pew that's reserved for pall-bearers. I know your thoughts, Deacon. I know the people of Wagon Grove, and I wouldn't have gone out to stop a bullet if the whole town had been moved away!

The last notes of the organ died off and they walked down the aisle in a deep

hush. A man knocked a hymnal to the floor with his knee and people looked at them without making their looks obvious. Then Frank drew his knees inside the narrow way between benches and the Deacon crouched down beside him.

Emily Lant was sitting a little aside with the ladies of the law and order group. She was staring straight ahead with her hands in her lap, not seeing anything and still hearing the spell of that Beatty organ. It was so quiet he could hear the Deacon's knee-cap snap as he took his seat.

Then the parson lifted his voice.

"This boy has lived a life that was enviable in its cleanliness. I know well what Saint Peter will say when he reaches the pearly gate. 'Enter, for you have done your earthly work well'. Here on my right hand sits his mother, who will fondly cherish that memory. While down in front sits his brother. I know now kindredship of love will flame into life and Frank will be all things that Edward has been."

He went on to recount in minute detail how Ed Lant had answered the Master's call. Gradually he caught up with the present and went over last night's occurrences, as best he knew them.

Coming home from a visit at the Pringle home, Ed had been drawn to the rear of the Wagon Grove Bank. A noise had drawn him here—they were able to follow the prints of his boots in the dust. There had been a horse tethered at the elm that grew behind the bank and someone, obviously, was at work over the safe. Ed could have called out, could have awakened the town. But he preferred not to bring danger to another man. Remembering he had seen a holstered gun on a saddle horse, Ed Lant had backtracked and secured the weapon.

Then, as the safebreaker ran swiftly from the rear door, Ed Lant had brought his gun to his shoulder. He had gone alone into the yard beside the bank building, not knowing for certain whether

THE GOLDEN HORSE

THAT glamorous equine product of California and Texas—the golden palomino—is mighty expensive. A colt can't be purchased for less than $500, a mare draws around $5,000, and if you want a full-blooded stallion, the price will probably hover around $10,000—if you're good at bargaining. And if the tariff seems steep, the reason is simple: the breed has the reputation for being the most beautiful in the world. It's also the most fabulous, when one realizes that there were only a handful of such animals in the middle 1930's, as compared to the 10,000 "golden horses" that exist today. What's more, there's a bona fide organization in the West known as the Palomino Horse Association, which boasts a membership of about 3,000 horse breeders. The palomino is useful as well as ornamental. It's not only in demand at horse shows, parades, rodeos and fiestas, but the Coast Guard found the creatures perfect during World War II. They were ideal for patroling the western shores of our country because their lovely light colors "blended in" so well with surrounding sand and rocks.

——Bess Ritter

another bandit lurked in the night. Here in the yard the killer had shot in cold blood and ridden away on his horse. Had Frank Lant unfortunately not been away from town on business the story would have been different.

The killer would have been apprehended by now, and perhaps Ed Lant would still be alive.

Mother Lant sat gravely through all this, her eyes fixed straight ahead, hearing only the haunting echoes of the Beatty organ. Lydia Pringle had collapsed on her organist's bench and a bevy of young women were administering smelling salts. Frank Lant sat through the parson's talk in silence, his chin lowered on his shirt. He had heard no more than a few of the words.

His fancy was busy in the outer world, in the free, clean air, with sleek black horses and the carriage and a woman with raven black hair. . . .

THEY carried the stout oaken box out the church door and down the creaking pine steps. Eight men who had been selected for their friendliness to Ed Lant —for their brawn of arm and back. Four of them had been Ed's classmates during the two terms they had attended Beatrice Pringle's school. In addition, they had asked the blacksmith to lend his strength, Sol Bender from the land-office, the Deacon, and Frank Lant.

Standing about the fresh grave the parson lifted his voice in prayer. Soft light of evening washed between the trees and only the vesper song of the birds added its notes to the Parson's prayer. There was no sobbing, now, no organ. Lydia Pringle was inside with the young women to attend her.

Emily Lant stood alone at the grave and watched the box being lowered.

Her face was bare of emotion; simply a lined, leathery mask that revealed no inner tumult. Mel Lant had brought her West in his wagon and the bare prairies had taught her to hide her feelings. Afterward people would be saying that she took it cool.

The last word was over and the parson had failed to mention clay. It didn't stack up as a sermon, Frank thought. The prayer had worked only partly into the picture his mind was spinning—of a woman with white cheeks and soft mouth, God how soft!

But to him a service wasn't complete without some pointed reference to ashes or clay.

There were a pair of shovels leaning against the earth-bank and the Deacon reached with his spindly arm. "Well," he sniffed, "we might just as well get it covered."

You're just as cold-blooded as me, Frank thought. With the restlessness slashing through him he reached for the second shovel. He caught the broken sob from his mother when the falling earth brought back its hollow sound of the casket. He lifted his head and looked at her and then he wondered if she was going to break at the last.

She wasn't crying so that you'd know it but the pain and emptiness had worked through her outer shell. She was staring at something inside her fingers and he saw she was holding a pair of tiny baby shoes.

There was feeling in her face that he remembered from afar, from when he first had opened his eyes.

It did something to the brute inside him. Maybe it was like the parson said, a kindredship of love coming into flame. He wasn't thinking of the soft mouth anymore —he knew he'd never think of Deborah again. She was past and beyond, and from this moment all life would resolve itself into torture. A monstrous torture from which no man could find a road of escape. The dream was gone, the unclean dream he had had of Deborah. All that remained was the suffering. He sank his shovel deep in the earth and leaned against it for support.

He was thinking now.

Ma, you don't know it. You'll never know it till you get to Saint Peter's gate. I wasn't out of Wagon Grove last night. It was me that shot him down! ● ● ●

A Memorable Gunfight

By LAURAN PAINE

An astounding true tale of survival against impossible odds

FREQUENTLY a reader of Western stories become critical about the number of shots it takes to down a villian. Some argue that writers are not adhering to facts or even possibilities when they have one man shoot it out with a posse for hours, even days, with both sides shooting for all they're worth, and not hitting anything.

In all probability this type of yarn does sometimes see print, but to refute the critic's side of the argument let's examine one gunfight backed by actual facts—the fight between Elfego Baca, self appointed lawman in a sleepy little hamlet named Frisco, and a big posse of riders from the great Slaughter outfit in New Mexico who wanted his blood for arresting one of their number. Incidentally, the town now is in Catron County, New Mexico, though at the time of the Baca-Slaughter siege it was in Socorro County.

Baca made the nearly fatal mistake of apprehending the cowboy, whose name was McCarty, for shooting up the town while under the influence of liquor he had been drinking in a Frisco emporium known as Milligan's Saloon. Baca's zealous act was a challenging one because McCarty was a Texan and Slaughter, his employer, was another Texan who was a law in New Mexico Territory. On the other hand, Elfego Baca

was a Mexican, and not considered to be in the same class as McCarty, the Texan.

Baca, however, was only nineteen years old, and not too worried about bearding grown men, even Texas gunmen. So he arrested McCarty and disarmed him without any trouble, because McCarty was not a troublemaker. He was simply a cowboy on the loose, full of pep and vinegar.

Baca marched his prisoner before the *alcalde*, or justice of the peace, who took one look at the Slaughter cowboy and decided he didn't want to hear anything about it. Baca was a determined young lawman, however, so he decided to take his prisoner to the county seat. Owing to the lateness of the hour he delayed their departure until the following morning, took his prisoner to a friend's house in the Mexican colony for the rest of the night, and turned in.

Long before morning, though, news of McCarthy's arrest and the circumstances surrounding it reached the Slaughter ranch. The irate Texans, led by a foreman named Perham, saddled up and split the breeze for Frisco. There they quickly located Baca and his prisoner and profanely shouted that they were on the prod, and demanded the release of the prisoner.

Baca shouted back that he would count to three, and if the Slaughter riders weren't out of Frisco by that time he'd cut them down. This went over with the Texans like a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.

Baca counted—and fired. The Texans scattered, and in the excitement Perham's horse stumbled and fell, killing the foreman almost instantly. A Slaughter cowboy named Allen was struck in the knee by one of Baca's bullets, but the rest of the crew got out of the line of fire in time to escape lead.

Riders from other spreads, hearing what had happened, fanned out over the countryside and spread the word. In a short time cowboys and ranchers thronged to the plaza of the little town. The Mexican population had prudently deserted the settlement, seeking sanctuary in secluded *jacales*. And Baca had shifted his prisoner to a safer hiding place.

Efforts to effect a truce were made by men who had managed to keep calm—solid citizens like Hightower, Martin, and Cook. They pleaded with the hotheads to talk things over reasonably, but their answer was more furious swearing, and wilder threats from the Slaughter faction. They were in no mood to palaver. They wanted blood, specifically the blood of Elfego Baca, and eighty armed and mounted men thundered to the mean hovel—*jacal*, in the Southwest—where Baca was standing at the corner of the shack in plain sight.

As the dust settled, Baca nodded and said good morning to the men. But, angered at the Mexican's coolness which seemed to one Slaughter cowboy to be a personal affront—he had been drinking heavily—the waddy yelled an insulting oath and fired a shot.

With both guns drawn, Baca backed down a rubbish-strewn alley to a mud and *pola verde jacal*, the home of an elderly Mexican woman and her two sons. He ordered them to get out, or be killed by the whooping *Tejanos*. They took one look and got, pronto.

Jim Herne, one of Slaughter's notorious gunslinging toughs, was in the forefront of the attacking cowboys. Herne was a big man, mean as poison and as deadly as a rattler, a wanted man in Texas. Above all things on earth he hated Mexicans. Cursing violently in his bull bass, he ordered Baca to come out and be damned quick. Baca'c answer was two well-placed slugs, either of which would have killed the Texan, and one did.

The Slaughter cowboys took Herne's body away, and set about methodically then to eliminate Baca, the *jacal* he was in, and everything that might exist to remind the world that a Mexican had stood up to a Texan.

By nine o'clock in the morning, Elfego stood alone against eighty or more of the hardest and toughest Texans in New Mexico. His only protection was the crude mud wattle *jacal*, about as good for turning bullets as a pair of spectacles. But he stood off that small army of cowboys until nightfall, the first day, and from midnight, when he scotched two sneak attempts to eliminate him, until the following morning. All that day he held them off, and didn't agree to an armistice until late in the afternoon.

No less than four thousand bullets had been pumped into the flimsy *jacal*. In the door alone were three hundred and sixty-five bullets, both revolver and rifle.

Baca had killed four Slaughter cowboys and wounded a score or more. It was later said, concerning his prowess, that he probably would have cleaned up the entire crew if the Texans hadn't "damned well hid."

When the Slaughter faction fired, they did so in volleys, sending a crushing number of bullets into the shaky shack where young Baca waited for a lull so he could get in some shooting himself.

In all, that day Elfego Baca held off his Texas attackers for over thirty hours, with someone trying determinedly every minute to kill him. Once a cowboy crawled to the *jacal* and placed dynamite against it. The explosion knocked down everything the bullets hadn't cut to pieces before, except the one corner where Baca crouched.

When that didn't flush the Mexican out of his "fort," the Texans sent against him a volunteer who probably was the only armored cowboy on record. Cleverly contriving a crude form of armored protection out of the barrel of an old wood stove, the Slaughter cowboy began a brave frontal assault on the ruins of the *jacal*. When the Texan got close, he peered around his armor plate—just what Baca had been waiting for. He fired, and the Slaughter cowboy clapped one hand to his bleeding head and retreated like a crab with the hot foot. Baca's bullet had skinned under his scalp from front to back but miraculously had not penetrated the skull, leaving the victim shaken up and dazed, but alive—which was the main thing with that cowhand.

In this factual account of an actual gunfight there is proof that many thousands of bullets were fired, and by men whose claim to distinction—and frequently to extinction—was that they were topnotch gunslingers. Discounting about thirty per cent of the bragadoccio concerning the gun prowess of the Slaughter spread, those cowboys nevertheless were men whose familiarity with guns was equal to that of any others at that time. Yet they, fighting spiritedly and determinedly against one man for over thirty hours, and firing all the bullets they could beg, borrow, or steal, could not get their man!

At Baca's trial—he had two and was acquitted both times—one Texan swore under oath that he aimed his .45 at Baca's chest from no further away than ten feet and fired, and couldn't for the life of him see why he hadn't killed the Mex. He insisted that he had a rep as a first-class shot with a hand gun, yet not one of his bullets had struck Baca.

There was some talk of miraculous protection, but since this account is not concerned with psychic phenomena, but only with the number of bullets writers use to annihilate their characters, such research will be left to the more experienced, and only known facts be related.

Elfego Baca, who probably holds some sort of record in Western history as the man most shot at, lived to know other fighting experiences, but none to equal those thirty hours when he, a lone man in a rickety house of mud and stakes, held off a band of eighty or more Texas cowboys who fired six thousand bullets at him and didn't kill him.

Expert marksmen may disagree, but bullets flying every which way is possible, after all—and not only in a story.

Few could ever know how really brave a man Lew Shane was. Otherwise he would be dead

His right hand dipped toward holster

TINHORN HERO

By

LESLIE ERNENWEIN

LEW SHANE came out of Doc Farnum's office and stood on the railed platform above an outside stairway. This was less than an hour since his arrival in Junction; since a score of men had welcomed him home with hero-worshiping regard, and Mayor Fred Maxwell had proclaimed, "Ellsworth's loss is Junction's gain!"

Shane grimaced, recalling the questions they'd asked him about the final showdown

which newspapers across the land had referred to as "The Great Gunfight." His friends had examined the puckered scar where a bullet had peeled a strip of hide from his left cheek. They'd asked if it was really true that he'd been struck by five bullets before he killed his three assailants.

Did they think he limped for the fun of limping?

Shane had been tempted to tell them why he didn't want their hero worship; why he felt like a fool for accepting it. There had been nothing heroic about prowling dark alleys with a star in his vest while sweat dripped from his armpits and apprehension rose in his throat until it gagged him. A man who lived in muscle-cocked expectancy day after day didn't feel heroic, or brave, or gallant—none of the things the newspapers said about him. That last night, with three guns against him, he had felt like a thumb-sucking dunce.

Yet, because he knew his admirers wouldn't understand these things, Shane had swallowed his sarcasm. He had even managed to dredge up a grin when young Bob Elmendorf had suggested:

"Sis will be tickled to see you, Lew."

Shane wasn't grinning now. His angular, high-boned face was wholly grave as he peered down at Main Street. He made a tall, lean-shanked shape standing there in morning's sunlight; a forlorn and lonely shape.

It occurred to him that Junction hadn't changed in the year he'd been away. Main Street's business establishments were the same weather-warped structures with tilted board awnings above plank sidewalks. There were the same gnawed hitch-racks in front of Maxwell's Mercantile, the Empire Hotel and Flannery's Saloon; the same expanse of rutted, hoof-pocked dust that turned into boggy mud after a rain.

SHANE'S questing eyes focused on a house farther down the street where a sign said:

DRESSMAKING

The house was exactly as it had been a year ago. And Miriam Elmendorf, he supposed, would be the same—a gracious, dark-haired young woman with warm eyes that were neither blue nor brown but a sort of hazel shade in between. Thinking back to the last time he had looked into Miriam's lovely eyes, Shane remembered how confident he'd been. "I'll bring back enough money to build a house fit for a bride," he'd told her.

Even then, in the final moment before he boarded a northbound stage, Miriam had tried to talk him out of going. She'd said it would be better to live in a homestead shack than have him risk his life wearing a city marshal's badge. But the offer of high pay had been too much for him to resist. It had been almost four times more than he'd got for being a deputy sheriff in Junction County.

"I can save a real stake in one year's time," he'd told her. "It will give us the start we need."

And so he had gone to Ellsworth.

"Twelve months," Shane said sighingly. "Twelve tough months."

He had expected it would be more difficult than being a deputy sheriff. More money, more work, was how he figured it.

Ellsworth was a rough-and-tumble trail town with railroad tracks running through Main Street. It was a much bigger town than Junction could ever hope to be. He had heard about the solid slab of magnesia limestone that served as a sidewalk in front of the Grand Central Hotel, had known of the high-stake gambling and the roistering trail drivers. But he hadn't known about Nauchville at the city's east end—that hell-hole of brothels, disreputable saloons and gambling joints that had become a modern Gomorrah.

"We want it cleaned up," the citizens' committee had told him.

Shane had understood then why they were willing to pay such high wages.

Well, he had earned his wages. And saved a bigger stake, due to rewards received for outlaws killed or captured, than he'd hoped for. There would be money to buy some cows in addition to building a good house on his homestead in the Hondo Hills. There might

even be enough left over to construct a drift fence that would keep Red Pelky's cattle off his land.

Recalling past trouble with that bullying rancher, Shane thought cynically, He'll not welcome me back.

Shane went down the stairs and walked toward the sign that said:

DRESSMAKING

When he lallygagged along like this, real slow, the limp was scarcely noticeable. The Ellsworth medico had made certain predictions against which Shane had hoisted a protective shield of unbelief. But Doc Farnum had reduced the shield to a tattered strand of stubborn hope.

Shane didn't notice Red Pelky, squatting on his heels in the blacksmith doorway, until the rancher exclaimed;

"Well, if it ain't the big hero of Ellsworth, come home to roost!"

Shane nodded a wordless greeting. There was a derisive tone to Red's voice. His milk-blue eyes were calculating and inquisitive as he asked, "Did you get rich on that big money job?"

"No, not rich," Shane said, and waved to Joe Eggleston who stood at his forge.

The blacksmith had been one of the men who'd welcomed him back. Now Joe suggested, "Don't pay Red no heed. He's just jealous, is all."

Pelky didn't like that, and showed it by demanding, "Who'd be jealous of a tinhorn hero?"

Resentment had its quick way with Shane. A hushed fury was in his voice when he asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you quit when the going got rough, didn't you?"

Shane couldn't understand it. Why was Red Pelky prodding him so soon, and so deliberately? Aware of two men who stood listening to this on the barber shop stoop, Shane thought, They're expecting me to jump him.

PELKY had got to his feet. He said tauntingly, "I don't hear you denying it."

Shane shook his head. This didn't make sense. "Had all the fighting I wanted," he explained, forcing a calm and patient tone. "Enough to last me a lifetime."

Red laughed at him. "That's why I called you a tinhorn hero," he announced, plainly pleased that he had an audience. And now, as if observing this for the first time, he blurted, "Why, you ain't packing a gun!" He spat, as if disgusted and said, "Never thought a big city marshal wouldn't have a gun strapped on."

He sauntered off toward Flannery's Saloon in the strutting fashion of a man well pleased with himself.

Shane knew that what had happened was only bald-faced bravado on Pelky's part. But there was no way to prove it without calling the red-headed rancher's bluff.

Presently, as Shane passed the stage line barn, Bob Elmendorf came out and asked, "You been to see Sis yet, Lew?"

"Going to call on her now," Shane said. Remembering that Bob, who worked as hostler, had his heart set on becoming a stage-coach driver, he asked, "When they going to give you a run?"

"Next month," Bob said, a grin brightening his freckled, boyish face. "I'll be eighteen then—and old enough."

"That's fine," Shane said. "Driving stage pays good wages."

As he turned to go, Bob asked, "How come you don't wear your gun, Lew?"

Shane shrugged. "A man shouldn't need a gun in his home town."

"Well, not you," Bob said, frank admiration in his eyes. "Not after all the big fights you won at Ellsworth. I don't reckon there's a man in this whole country that could stand against you with a gun."

The words, and the hero-worshiping way in which they were spoken, embarrassed Lew Shane. He shook his head.

He said soberly, "It doesn't work out like that, Bob. No matter how big a rep a man makes there's always somebody wanting to try his luck, wanting to make a name for himself."

And, going on, Shane thought, That's why Red Pelky tried to pick a fight with me!

There was an increasing heat in the sun-

light now. It made a warmth against Shane's shoulders. But it didn't alter the coldness inside him.

This reunion with Miriam would be different than he'd visualized it; hugely different. Instead of hurrying to see her he was walking slowly, yet even so he couldn't help limping. And he couldn't help thinking. A man might be able to hide certain flaws from other men, but he couldn't hide them from himself, nor foist them on the girl he'd wanted to marry.

As Shane opened the gate he thought, She mustn't feel sorry for me.

That was the most important part of this deal. He could stand the rest of it. But not pity.

Miriam evidently heard the gate creak open, for instantly she was in the doorway, exclaiming:

"Lew! You've finally got here!"

Shane had imagined this meeting a hundred times—Miriam hurrying to him with warm, glowing eyes and smiling lips. But he resisted the urgent impulse to take her in his arms as he said gustily:

"You're even prettier than I remembered."

Plainly surprised at his restraint, Miriam asked, "Aren't you going to kiss me, Lew?"

Shane grinned at her. "Out here, in broad daylight?"

That seemed to baffle her the more. She peered at him as if suspecting some sort of joke. She said, "You never used to fret about being seen." Then, as he followed her up to the veranda, she said gently, "You're limping."

Shane nodded, and took the chair she offered him. "I had Doc Farnum look me over. He seems to think it's a permanent thing, but I'm not so sure."

MIRIAM thought about that for a moment. Gravity brought a change to her oval face but it didn't diminish the womanly warmth in her eyes.

"You're lucky to be alive," she said. "It must've been awful, those three men all shooting at you!"

"Well, it wasn't exactly nice," Shane admitted. A cynical smile quirked his lips as he added, "To hear folks talk you'd think it was something wonderful. Something glorious, in which a man should take pride."

"Men may think that way, but not women," Miriam said soberly. "You should hear Bob brag about you. That piece in the newspaper made such an impression on him! He thinks you're the greatest man who ever lived, Lew. More important than Washington, Lincoln or Robert E. Lee. Bob took up target practice after he read that piece, said he might decide to get a job as deputy sheriff instead of being a stage driver."

"Just a foolish notion he'll get over," Shane suggested.

But Miriam said, "I don't know. Bob is proud, like you."

"Like me?"

She nodded.

"But I'm not proud," Shane insisted.

Miriam looked at him for a long moment before asking, "Aren't you?"

After he had left her and was back in his hotel room, sprawled across the bed, Shane wondered about that question. Why should Miriam think he was proud of having been a city marshal? He had neither talked nor acted in a way that would make her think so. Couldn't she understand that all this hero stuff embarrassed him, that he wanted to forget Ellsworth and everything connected with it?

Yet she had accused him of being proud.

There was another thing he didn't understand. Miriam hadn't mentioned the homestead, or the house he intended to build—not a word about the plans they'd made a year ago. He had intended to tell her that things would have to be postponed for awhile, but it hadn't been necessary. And that seemed odd.

Was it the limp?

Was Miriam satisfied to let a crippled man limp along by himself?

That didn't seem possible. Not the Miriam he'd known, the girl who'd been willing to share his homestead shack a year ago. But you couldn't tell about women. They might seem soft and sentimental at times, but they had practical sides also.

The knock on his door startled Shane. Acting on pure impulse he reached toward the head of his bed. Then he realized that this

wasn't Ellsworth, and that a holstered gun wasn't hanging there. It was in his valise, along with the silver star he'd had to buy.

"Come in," he called.

Bob Elmendorf stepped inside and closed the door. He looked at Shane, not smiling or speaking for a moment. Then he said solemnly, "Red Pelky says he bluffed you down."

"So?"

"He says he called you a tinhorn hero."

Shane shook out his Durham sack and gave his attention to shaping a cigarette. But Bob's questioning eyes were a steady pressure upon him.

He said, "I told Pelky I'd had enough gun fighting to last me a lifetime. That's the truth, Bob. It's no good."

"But why would you let him call you a tinhorn?" Bob insisted.

Shane thumbed a match to flame. He said, "Because I don't want to fight him, Bob. I've had enough."

"But you can't let him go around town telling folks that last fight turned you gun shy." And when Shane didn't speak, Bob said hotly, "I called him a darn liar to his face! I—well, I told him to get out of town or there'd be trouble."

Shane frowned, guessing the rest, and dreading it. "What did Red say?"

"He laughed at me. He said you wouldn't fight him, and that I dassn't."

SHANE took a deep drag on the cigarette and exhaled slowly. This was a complication he hadn't reckoned on. All the angles of his problem had been solved, he'd thought, all the dismal evasions and omissions.

"Red Pelky has always been too big for his britches," Bob said. "It's time he was whittled down to his proper size."

By a big hero, Shane thought angrily. This was what a gun rep did for a man. Made him a target. Hero worship, then bullets. The pattern never changed.

Patiently, as if explaining an old and humorless joke, Shane said, "I've had enough, Bob. More'n aplenty."

"You mean you won't fight him?"

"Reckon not."

[*Turn page*]

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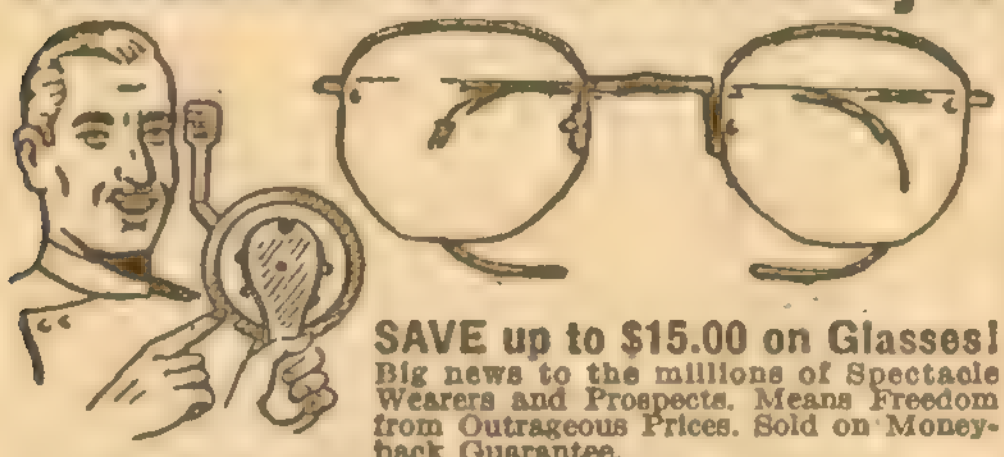

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Bob stared at him, his eyes wide with bafflement. For a moment he seemed shocked beyond the power of speech or movement. Then he turned abruptly and went out of the room, not closing the door behind him.

Shane listened to Bob's hasty footsteps on the stairs. When that sound faded he looked at the fingers holding his cigarette and, observing how they trembled, cursed morosely. . . .

When Shane heard the rhythmic bong of hoofs on the Big Arroyo bridge, he thought, The noon stage. And he was mildly surprised that he should have retained the memory of this town's routine so long.

Listening to the diminished rumble as the teams slowed down, he could visualize young Bob out there waiting to unhook the wheeler's trace chains. Forty-five minutes from now fresh horses would haul the stage westward and Bob would go home for the noon meal Miriam had prepared for him.

Shane smiled, recalling how many times he had made a third member at the kitchen table. Miriam was an excellent cook. She could bake an apple pie that made a man's mouth water just to look at it.

When Shane heard the stage depart he considered going down to the dining room, but he dreaded the effort of negotiating the stairs. Besides, he had no appetite for hotel fare. He'd got his fill of that in Ellsworth.

He must have dozed off then, for he had no awareness of Fred Maxwell's presence in the room until the mayor spoke to him. Shane sat up abruptly, peering at this rotund little man and asking, "What did you say, Fred?"

"Bob Elmendorf has gone to get his pistol," Maxwell announced, panting from his hurried trip up the stairs. "There's going to be a shootout betwixt him and Red Pelky, unless you stop it!"

Shane shook his head in unbelief. He said, "Bob wouldn't do such a loco thing."

But in this same instant he remembered how baffled and upset the youngster had been this morning; how outraged.

"He will, unless you beat him to it," Maxwell insisted. "That's why I rushed up here, Lew. So you could put Pelky in his place." Breathing easier now, the mayor smiled and

said, "A simple chore for a man who's been city marshal of Ellsworth."

Some sardonic thought altered Shane's face as he considered this fat little man who'd never fired a gun. He said, "Your deputy sheriff should handle this. There's a law against setting off firearms in town."

"He's attending trial court at the county seat," Maxwell said. "Won't be back for three, four days at least." He stepped over to the window and peered out. "Red is waiting in front of Flannery's. I don't see Bob, yet. Perhaps his sister is trying to talk him out of it."

"Maybe she will," Shane suggested, but he doubted it.

So did Maxwell, for he said, "You'd better strap on your gun and go down front, just in case." Then in a voice high-pitched with excitement, Maxwell announced, "Bob is coming out of the house now!"

Shane turned at once to his valise. He took out his gun-gear and strapped it on. Then, observing the silver star, he asked, "Will you appoint me city marshal for an hour?"

"Sure," Maxwell said eagerly. "Sure I will, Lew!"

AFTERNOON'S slanting sunlight gave the dust of Main Street a metallic shine as Lew Shane came off the hotel veranda. Heat radiated from the plank walk, sucked moisture from the palms of Shane's perspiring hands, yet he felt cold. Men stood on the veranda behind him, on the barber shop stoop and in the stage barn doorway, yet he felt alone.

Shane glanced once at Bob Elmendorf who made a sun-burnished shape farther down the street, then gave his strict attention to Pelky. Red stood in front of Flannery's, one shoulder tilted against an awning post. Facing eastward, toward Bob, the redhead wasn't aware of Shane's presence on the street until Joe Eggleston called eagerly:

"Make him eat his words, Lew!"

Pelky turned, blinking against the sunlight. Shane saw his right hand dip instinctively toward holster, and understood that Red might not take time to notice the star

[*Turn page*]

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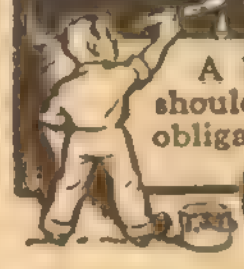

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on his vest. Yet, because this was a rôle rehearsed on countless occasions in Ellsworth, Shane continued his methodical, limping march toward Pelky.

"Why you wearing that law badge?" Red demanded, seeing the star then.

Observing his baffled expression, Shane thought, He's off balance, and took hope in that knowledge. Red had primed himself for a fight and had figured out the angles. But this wasn't the fight he'd planned for, and the angles were different. Instead of having the sunlight behind him, it was in his face.

Red's glance shifted from Shane's holster to the silver star, and he asked again, "Why you wearing that law badge?"

"I've been appointed city marshal," Shane said.

"City marshal—of Junction?"

Shane nodded, giving Pelky a strict and unwavering appraisal as he came on. If Red didn't draw now there might be a chance—

Pelky moved away from the post. Placing his back against the front wall of the saloon he glanced at Bob Elmendorf coming along the opposite sidewalk. Then he peered at Shane and asked sullenly:

"You butting into this?"

"There's a law against setting off firearms in town," Shane said. "I intend to enforce it."

He was within a dozen paces of Pelky now, near enough to observe the twitching of a muscle in Red's cheek, to see the bright shining of his sun-squinted eyes. Caught between conflicting emotions, Red teetered on the thin edge of grabbing his gun. He was like a tight-strung wire vibrating to each gust of a shifting wind.

But Lew Shane revealed no knowledge of this as he said, "You've been talking when you should've been listening, Red."

Pelky peered at him in the gawk-eyed way of a man not sure, yet wanting to be sure. "I thought you'd had enough fighting for a lifetime," he muttered.

"Sure," Shane said, solemn now. "I got sick of seeing men die."

Close enough now to reach out and touch Pelky, he halted.

Somewhere on Fremont Avenue a pump

handle set up a methodical creaking, and presently a woman called, "Albert—come to supper!"

Doc Farnum came down his outside stairway. He joined the group in front of Krell's barber shop, seeming to be hugely astonished by what he saw.

For a lingering interval - there was no sound on the street. Then Shane suggested, "Maybe you said some things you didn't mean, Red."

Perspiration made a greasy shine on Pelky's tight cheeks. He looked at the splayed fingers of Shane's right hand hovering close to holster.

"Is that right, Red?"

Pelky's eyes shifted to flick a questing glance at the expectant faces of men who were watching from roundabout stoops and doorways. He gave Shane another probing appraisal. Then the tightness went out of his eyes and out of his face and out of his body. Meekly, in the sheepish way of a man admitting a trivial prank, he said:

"That's right, Lew. It was just talk."

Turning away he walked to his horse at the hitchrack, climbed into saddle and rode off without a backward glance.

BOB ELMENDORF hurried toward Shane, a holstered gun thumping his hip in odd contrast to the boyish smile on his face. "You whittled Red down to proper size!" he exclaimed.

But it was Miriam, waiting quietly across the street, who attracted Shane's attention. Ignoring men who were voicing their hero-worshiping regard, he limped over to Miriam, and asked with mock concern, "Am I late for supper?"

She shook her head. She smiled at him with the misty brightness of unshed tears in her eyes.

Doc Farnum came up and demanded, "Suppose Red had grabbed his gun?"

Shane shrugged, not wanting to discuss it.

"But you couldn't have drawn against him—"

"Not so loud," Shane cautioned. "I told you it wasn't going to be known."

Presently, as Shane limped along the

[*Turn page*]

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street with Miriam, she said, "So your right arm is crippled."

"Well, there's no strength in it. Doc says I may have to wait a long time for the damaged muscles to heal properly."

Miriam didn't speak again until Shane opened the gate for her, using his left hand. Then she said, "So that's why you didn't kiss me." And grasping the lapels of his vest, she demanded, "Why didn't you tell me, Lew? Why keep it a secret?"

"Might be a risky thing to let such news get around," he explained.

Miriam shook her head. "That's not why you didn't tell me."

Shane shrugged.

"I thought it was the limp," Miriam reflected. "That's why I said you were proud. And you are, Lew—so proud you'd risk your life for a scatterheels boy, and refuse to kiss his sister."

She seemed angry now.

"Perhaps Red Pelky was right when he called you a tinhorn hero!"

"But I may be crippled for life," Shane said. "You wouldn't want—"

"Oh, yes, I would," she interrupted.

Impatient with him, Miriam took hold of his shoulders and used her strength to bring his head down.

The scent of her hair was like a well-remembered perfume, and the womanly warmth in her eyes drove the coldness from him. Here, within the circle of his arms, was an end to all the dark alleys, all the evasions.

He asked, "Will you share the shack with me until a house can be built?"

She nodded, and the frank pressure of her lips told Lew Shane how glorious the sharing would be. ● ● ●

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